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FENTON'S QUEST

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FENTON'S QUEST

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



LONDON
WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER
WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

1871

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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.



CHAP.		PAGE
I.	'WHAT MUST BE SHALL BE'	I
II.	DOUBTFUL INFORMATION	15
III.	BOUGHT WITH A PRICE	41
IV.	COMING ROUND	50
V.	A FULL CONFESSION	68
VI.	AN ILL-OMENED WEDDING	92
VII.	A DOMESTIC MYSTERY	109
VIII.	IN PURSUIT	143
IX.	OUTWARD BOUND	174
X.	THE PLEASURES OF WYNCOMB	199
XI.	MR. WHITELAW MAKES AN END OF THE MYSTERY	218
XII.	AFTER THE FIRE	247
XIII.	MR. WHITELAW MAKES HIS WILL	262
XIV.	ELLEN REGAINS HER LIBERTY	275
XV.	CLOSING SCENES	287

FENTON'S QUEST.

CHAPTER I.

‘WHAT MUST BE SHALL BE.’

ELLEN CARLEY waited in the little parlour, dimly lighted by one candle. The fire had very nearly gone out, and she had some difficulty in brightening it a little. She waited very patiently, wondering what her father could have to say to her, and not anticipating much pleasure from the interview. He was going to talk about Stephen Whitelaw and his hateful money perhaps. But let him say what he would, she was prepared to hold her own firmly, determined to provoke him by no open opposition, unless matters came to an extremity, and then to let him see at once and for ever that her resolution was fixed, and that it was useless to persecute her.

'If I have to go out of this house to-night, I will not flinch,' she said to herself.

She had some time to wait. It had been past midnight when they came home, and it was a quarter to one when William Carley came into the parlour. He was in an unusually communicative mood to-night, and had been superintending the grooming of his horse, and talking to the underling who had waited up to receive him.

He was a little unsteady in his gait as he came into the parlour, and Ellen knew that he had drunk a good deal at Wyncomb. It was no new thing for her to see him in this condition unhappily, and the shrinking shuddering sensation with which he inspired her to-night was painfully familiar.

'It's very late, father,' she said gently, as the bailiff flung himself heavily into an arm-chair by the fireplace. 'If you don't want me for anything particular, I should be glad to go to bed.'

'Would you, my lass?' he asked grimly. 'But, you see, I do want you for something particular, something uncommon particular; so there's no call for you to be in a hurry. Sit down yonder,'

he added, pointing to the chair opposite his own.
‘I’ve got something to say to you, something serious.’

‘Father,’ said the girl, looking him full in the face, pale to the lips, but very firm, ‘I don’t think you’re in a state to talk seriously of anything.’

‘O, you don’t, don’t you, Miss Impudence? You think I’m drunk, perhaps. You’ll find that, drunk or sober, I’ve only one mind about you, and that I mean to be obeyed. Sit down, I tell you. I’m not in the humour to stand any nonsense to-night. Sit down.’

Ellen obeyed this mandate, uttered with a fierceness unusual even in Mr. Carley, who was never a soft-spoken man. She seated herself quietly on the opposite side of the hearth, while her father took down his pipe from the chimney-piece, and slowly filled it, with hands that trembled a little over the accustomed task.

When he had lighted the pipe, and smoked about half-a-dozen whiffs with a great assumption of coolness, he addressed himself to his daughter in an altered and conciliating tone.

‘Well, Nelly,’ he said, ‘you’ve had a rare day

at Wyncomb, and a regular ramble over the old house with Steph's cousin. What do you think of it ?'

' I think it's a queer gloomy old place enough, father. I wonder there's any one can live in it. The dark bare-looking rooms gave me the horrors. I used to think this house was dull, and seemed as if it was haunted; but it's lively and gay as can be, compared to Wyncomb.'

' Humph !' muttered the bailiff. ' You're a fanciful young lady, Miss Nell, and don't know a fine substantial old house when you see one. Life's come a little too easy to you, perhaps. It might have been better for you if you'd seen more of the rough side. Being your own missus too soon, and missus of such a place as this, has spoiled you a bit. I tell you, Nell, there ain't a better house in Hampshire than Wyncomb, though it mayn't suit your fanciful notions. Do you know the size of Stephen Whitelaw's farm ?'

' No, father; I've never thought about it.'

' What do you say to three hundred acres—over three hundred, nigher to four perhaps ?'

' I suppose it's a large farm, father. But I know nothing about such things.'

‘ You suppose it’s large, and you know nothing about such things !’ cried the bailiff, with an air of supreme irritation. ‘ I don’t believe any man was ever plagued with such an aggravating daughter as mine. What do you say to being mistress of such a place, girl ?—mistress of close upon four hundred acres of land ; not another man’s servant, bound to account for every blade of grass and every ear of corn, as I am, but free and independent mistress of the place, with the chance of being left a widow by and by, and having it all under your own thumb ; what do you say to that ?’

‘ Only the same that I have always said, father. Nothing would ever persuade me to marry Stephen Whitelaw. I’d rather starve.’

‘ And you shall starve, if you stick to that,’ roared William Carley with a blasphemous oath. ‘ But you won’t be such a fool, Nell. You’ll hear reason ; you won’t stand out against your poor old father and against your own interests. The long and the short of it is, I’ve given Whitelaw my promise that you shall be his wife between this and Easter.’

‘ What !’ exclaimed Ellen, with a faint cry of

horror ; 'you don't mean that you've promised that, father ! You can't mean it !'

'I can and do mean it, lass.'

'Then you've made a promise that will never be kept. You might have known as much when you made it. I'm sure I've been plain-spoken enough about Stephen Whitelaw.'

'That was a girl's silly talk. I didn't think to find you a fool when I came to the point. I let you have your say, and looked to time to bring you to reason. Come, Nell, you're not going against your father, are you ?'

'I must, father, in this. I'd rather die twenty deaths than marry that man. There's nothing I wouldn't rather do.'

'Isn't there ? You'd rather see your father in gaol, I suppose, if it came to that ?'

'See you in gaol !' cried the girl aghast. 'For heaven's sake, what do you mean, father ? What fear is there of your being sent to prison, because I won't marry Stephen Whitelaw ? I'm not a baby,' she added, with a hysterical laugh ; 'you can't frighten me like that.'

'No ; you're a very wise young woman, I dare-say ; but you don't know everything. You've

seen me down-hearted and out of sorts for this last half-year; but I don’t suppose you’ve troubled yourself much about it, except to worry me with silly questions sometimes, when I’ve not been in the humour to be talked to. Things have been going wrong with me ever since hay-harvest, and I haven’t sent Sir David sixpence yet for last year’s crops. I’ve put him off with one excuse after another from month to month. He’s a careless master enough at most times, and never over-sharp with my accounts. But the time has come when I can’t put him off any longer. He wants money badly, he says; and I’m afraid he begins to suspect something. Any way, he talks of coming here in a week or so to look into things for himself. If he does that, I’m ruined.’

‘But the money, father—the money for the crops—how has it gone? You’ve had it, haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ the bailiff answered with a groan; ‘I’ve had it, worse luck.’

‘And how has it gone?’

‘What’s that to you? What’s the good of my muddling my brains with figures to-night? It’s gone, I tell you. You know I’m fond of seeing a race, and never miss anything in that way

that comes-off within a day's drive of this place. I used to be pretty lucky once upon a time, when I backed a horse or bet against one. But this year things have gone dead against me; and my bad luck made me savage somehow, so that I went deeper than I've been before, thinking to get back what I'd lost.'

'O, father, father! how could you, and with another man's money?'

'Don't give me any of your preaching,' the bailiff answered gloomily; 'I can get enough of that at Malsham Chapel if I want it. It's in your power to pull me through this business if you choose.'

'How can I do that, father?'

'A couple of hundred pounds will set me square. I don't say there hasn't been more taken, first and last; but that would do it. Stephen Whitelaw will lend me the money—give it me, indeed, for it comes to that—the day he gets your consent to be his wife.'

'And you'd sell me to him for two hundred pounds, father?' the girl asked bitterly.

'I don't want to go to gaol.'

'And if you don't get the money from Stephen, what will happen?'

‘I can’t tell you that to a nicety. Penal servitude for life, most likely. They’d call mine a bad case, I daresay.’

‘But Sir David might be merciful to you, father. You’ve served him for a long time.’

‘What would he care for that? I’ve had his money, and he’s not a man that can afford to lose much. No, Nell, I look for no mercy from Sir David; those careless easy-going men are generally the hardest in such a business as this. It’s a clear case of embezzlement, and nothing can save me unless I can raise money enough to satisfy him.’

‘Couldn’t you borrow it of some one else besides Stephen Whitelaw?’

‘Who else is there that would lend me two hundred pounds? Ask yourself that, girl. Why, I haven’t five pounds’ worth of security to offer.’

‘And Mr. Whitelaw will only lend the money upon one condition?’

‘No, curse him!’ cried William Carley savagely. ‘I’ve been at him all this afternoon, when you and that woman were out of the room, trying to get it out of him as a loan, without waiting for your promise; but he’s too cautious for

that. “The day Ellen gives her consent, you shall have the money,” he told me; “I can’t say anything fairer than that or more liberal.”’

‘He doesn’t suspect why you want it, does he, father?’ Ellen asked with a painful sense of shame.

‘Who can tell what he may suspect? He’s as deep as Satan,’ said the bailiff, with a temporary forgetfulness of his desire to exhibit this intended son-in-law of his in a favourable light. ‘He knows that I want the money very badly; I couldn’t help his knowing that; and he must think it’s something out of the common that makes me want two hundred pounds.’

‘I daresay he guesses the truth,’ Ellen said, with a profound sigh.

It seemed to her the bitterest trial of all, that her father’s wrong-doing should be known to Stephen Whitelaw. That hideous prospect of the dock and the gaol was far off as yet; she had not even begun to realise it; but she did fully realise the fact of her father’s shame, and the blow seemed to her a heavy one, heavier than she could bear.

For some minutes there was silence between

father and daughter. The girl sat with her face hidden in her hands ; the bailiff smoked his pipe in sullen meditation.

‘Is there no other way?’ Ellen asked at last, in a plaintive despairing tone ; ‘no other way, father?’

‘None,’ growled William Carley. ‘You needn’t ask me that question again ; there is no other way ; you can get me out of my difficulties if you choose. I should never have been so venturesome as I was, if I hadn’t made sure my daughter would soon be a rich woman. You can save me if you like, or you can hold-off and let me go to prison. There’s no good preaching about it or arguing about it ; you’ve got the choice and you must make it. Most young women in your placee would think themselves uncommon lucky to have such a chance as you’ve got, instead of making a trouble about it, let alone being able to get their father out of a scrape. But you’re your own mistress, and you must do as you please.’

‘Let me have time to think,’ the girl pleaded piteously ; ‘let me have only a little time to think, father. And you do believe that I’m sorry for you, don’t you?’ she asked, kneeling beside

him and clasping his unwilling hand. ‘O father, I hope you believe that !’

‘I shall know what to believe when I know what you’re going to do,’ the bailiff answered moodily ; and his daughter knew him too well to hope for any more gracious speech than this.

She bade him good-night, and went slowly up to her own room to spend the weary wakeful hours in a bitter struggle, praying that she might be enlightened as to what she ought to do ; praying that she might die rather than become the wife of Stephen Whitelaw.

When she and her father met at breakfast in the dull gray January morning, his aspect was even darker than it had been on the previous night ; but he did not ask her if she had arrived at any conclusion. He took his meal in sullen silence, and left her without a word.

They met again a little before noon, at which hour it was Mr. Carley’s habit to consume a solid luncheon. He took his seat in the same gloomy silence that he had preserved at breakfast-time, but flung an open letter across the table towards his daughter.

‘Am I to read this ?’ she asked gently.

‘Yes, read it, and see what I’ve got to look to.’

The letter was from Sir David Forster; an angry one, revealing strong suspicions of his agent’s dishonesty, and announcing that he should be at the Grange on the fifth of the month, to make a close investigation of all matters connected with the bailiff’s administration. It was a letter that gave little hope of mercy, and Ellen Carley felt that it was so. She saw that there were no two sides to the question: she must save her father by the utter sacrifice of her own feelings, or suffer him to perish.

She sat for some minutes in silence, with Sir David’s letter in her hand, staring blankly at the lines in a kind of stupor; while her father ate cold roast-beef and pickled-cabbage—she wondered how he could eat at such a time—looking up at her furtively every now and then.

At last she laid down the letter, and lifted her eyes to his face. A deadly whiteness and despair had come over the bright soubrette beauty, and even William Carley’s hard nature was moved a little by the altered expression of his daughter’s countenance.

'It must be as you wish, father,' she said slowly; 'there is no help for it; I cannot see you brought to disgrace. Stephen Whitelaw must have the price he asks for his money.'

'That's a good lass,' cried the bailiff, springing up and clasping his daughter in his arms, a most unusual display of affection on his part; 'that's bravely spoken, Nell, and you never need repent the choice that'll make you mistress of Wyncomb Farm, with a good home to give your father in his old age.'

The girl drew herself hastily from his embrace, and turned away from him with a shudder. He was her father, and there was something horrible in the idea of his disgrace; but there was very little affection for him in her mind. He was willing to sell her into bondage in order to save himself. It was in this light she regarded the transaction with Stephen Whitelaw.

CHAPTER II.

DOUBTFUL INFORMATION.

THE early days of the new year brought little change in John Saltram's condition. Mr. Mew, and the physician who saw him once in every three days, seemed perhaps a shade more hopeful than they had been, but would express no decided opinion when Gilbert pressed them with close questioning. The struggle was still going on—the issue still doubtful.

‘If we could keep the mind at rest,’ said the physician, ‘we should have every chance of doing better; but this constant restlessness, this hyper-activity of the brain, of which you and Mr. Mew tell me, must needs make a perpetual demand upon the patient's physical powers. The waste is always going on. We cannot look for recovery until we obtain more repose.’

Several weeks had passed since the beginning of John Saltram's illness, and there were no tid-

ings from Mr. Medler. Every day Gilbert had expected some communication from that practitioner, only to be disappointed. He had called twice in Soho, and on both occasions had been received by a shabby-looking clerk, who told him that Mr. Medler was out, and not likely to come home within any definite time. He was inclined to fancy, by the clerk's manner on his second visit, that there was some desire to avoid an interview on Mr. Medler's part; and this fancy made him all the more anxious to see that gentleman. He did not, therefore, allow much time to elapse between this second visit to the dingy chambers in Soho and a third. This time he was more fortunate; for he saw the lawyer let himself in at the street-door with his latch-key, just as the cab that drove him approached the house.

The same shabby clerk opened the door to him.

‘I want to see your master,’ he said decisively, making a move towards the office-door.

The clerk contrived to block his way.

‘I beg your pardon, sir, I don't think Mr. Medler's in; but I'll go and see.’

‘You needn't give yourself the trouble. I saw

your master let himself in at this door a minute ago. I suppose you were too busy to hear him come in.'

The clerk coughed a doubtful kind of cough, significant of perplexity.

'Upon my word, sir, I believe he's out; but I'll see.'

'Thanks; I'd rather see myself, if you please,' Gilbert said, passing the perturbed clerk before that functionary could make up his mind whether he ought to intercept him.

He opened the office-door and went in. Mr. Medler was sitting at his desk, bending over some formidable document, with the air of a man who is profoundly absorbed by his occupation; with the air also, Gilbert thought, of a man who has been what is vernacularly called 'on the listen.'

'Good-morning, Mr. Medler,' Gilbert said politely; 'your clerk had such a conviction of your being out, that I had some difficulty in convincing him you were at home.'

'I've only just come in; I suppose Lucas didn't hear me.'

'I suppose not; I've been here twice before in

search of you, as I conclude you have been told. I have expected to hear from you daily.'

'Well, yes—yes,' replied the lawyer in a meditative way; 'I am aware that I promised to write—under certain circumstances.'

'Am I to conclude, then, that you were silent because you had nothing to communicate? that you have obtained no tidings of any kind respecting Mrs. Holbrook?'

Mr. Medler coughed; a cough no less expressive of embarrassment than that of his clerk.

'Why, you see, Mr. Fenton,' he began, crossing his legs, and rubbing his hands in a very deliberate manner, 'when I made that promise with reference to Mrs. Holbrook, I made it of course without prejudice to the interests or inclinations of my client. I might be free to communicate to you any information I received upon this subject—or I might find myself pledged to withhold it.'

Gilbert's face flushed with sudden excitement.

'What!' he cried, 'do you mean to say that you have solved the mystery of Marian Holbrook's fate? that you know her to be alive—safe—well, and have kept back the knowledge from me?'

'I have been compelled to submit to the wishes

of my client. I will not say that I have not offered considerable opposition to her desire upon this point, but finding her resolution fixed, I was bound to respect it.'

'She is safe—then all this alarm has been needless? You have seen her?'

'Yes, Mr. Fenton, I have seen her.'

'And she—*she* forbade you to let me know of her safety? She was willing that I should suffer all the anguish of uncertainty as to her fate? I could not have believed her so unkind.'

'Mrs. Holbrook had especial reasons for wishing to avoid all communication with former acquaintances. She explained those reasons to me, and I fully concurred in them.'

'She might have such reasons with regard to other people; she could have none with reference to me.'

'Pardon me, she mentioned your name in a very particular manner.'

'And yet she has had good cause to trust in my fidelity.'

'She has a very great respect and esteem for you, I am aware. She said as much to me. But her reasons for keeping her affairs to herself just

now are quite apart from her personal feeling for yourself.'

'I cannot understand this. I am not to see her then, I suppose; not to be told her address?'

'No; I am strictly forbidden to disclose her address to any one.'

'Yet you can positively assure me that she is in safety—her own mistress—happy?'

'She is in perfect safety—her own mistress—and as happy as it is possible she can be under the unfortunate circumstances of her married life. She has left her husband for ever; I will venture to tell you so much as that.'

'I am quite aware of that fact.'

'How so? I thought Mr. Holbrook was quite unknown to you?'

'I have learnt a good deal about him lately.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the lawyer, with a genuine air of surprise.

'But of course your client has been perfectly frank in her communications with you upon this subject?' Gilbert said. 'Yes; I know that Mrs. Holbrook has left her husband, but I did not for a moment suppose she had left him of her own free will. From my knowledge of her character

and sentiments, that is just the last thing I could have imagined possible. There was no quarrel between them ; indeed, she was expecting his return with delight at the very time when she left her home in Hampshire. The thought of sharing her fortune with him was one of perfect happiness. How can you explain her abrupt flight from him in the face of this ?

‘ I am not free to explain matters, Mr. Fenton,’ answered the lawyer ; ‘ you must be satisfied with the knowledge that the lady about whom you have been so anxious is safe.’

‘ I thank God for that,’ Gilbert said earnestly ; ‘ but that knowledge of itself is not quite enough. I shall be uneasy so long as there is this secrecy and mystery surrounding her fate. There is something in this sudden abandonment of her husband which is painfully inexplicable to me.’

‘ Mrs. Holbrook may have received some sudden revelation of her husband’s unworthiness. You are aware that a letter reached her a few hours before she left Hampshire ? There is no doubt that letter influenced her actions. I do not mind admitting a fact which is so obvious.’

‘The revelation that could move her to such step must have been a very startling one.’

‘It was strong enough to decide her course, replied the lawyer gravely.

‘And you can assure me that she is in good hands?’ Gilbert asked anxiously.

‘I have every reason to suppose so. She is with her father.’

Mr. Medler announced this fact as if there were nothing extraordinary in it. Gilbert started to his feet.

‘What!’ he exclaimed; ‘she is with Mr. Nowell—the father who neglected her in her youth, who of course seeks her now only for the sake of her fortune? And you call that being in good hands, Mr. Medler? For my own part, I cannot imagine a more dangerous alliance. When did Percival Nowell come to England?’

‘A very short time ago. I have only been aware of his return within the last two or three weeks. His first step on arriving in this country was to seek for his daughter.’

‘Yes; when he knew that she was rich, no doubt!’

‘I do not think that he was influenced by

mercenary motives,' the lawyer said, with a calm judicial air. 'Of course, as a man of the world, I am not given to look at such matters from a sentimental point of view. But I really believe that Mr. Nowell was anxious to find his daughter, and to atone in some measure for his former neglect.'

'A very convenient repentance,' exclaimed Gilbert, with a short bitter laugh. 'And his first act is to steal his daughter from her home, and hide her from all her former friends. I don't like the look of this business, Mr. Medler; I tell you so frankly.'

'Mr. Nowell is my client, you must remember, Mr. Fenton. I cannot consent to listen to any aspersion of his character, direct or indirect.'

'And you positively refuse to tell me where Mrs. Holbrook is to be found?'

'I am compelled to respect her wishes as well as those of her father.'

'She has been placed in possession of her property, I suppose?'

'Yes; her grandfather's will has been proved, and the estate now stands in her name. There was no difficulty about that—no reason for delay.'

‘Will you tell me if she is in London?’ Gilbert asked impatiently.

‘Pardon me, my dear sir, I am pledged to say nothing about Mrs. Holbrook’s whereabouts.’

Gilbert gave a weary sigh.

‘Well, I suppose it is useless to press the question, Mr. Medler,’ he said. ‘I can only repeat that I don’t like the look of this business. Your client, Mr. Nowell, must have a very strong reason for secrecy, and my experience of life has shown me that there is very seldom mystery without wrongdoing of some kind behind it. I thank God that Mrs. Holbrook is safe, for I suppose I must accept your assurance that she is so; but until her position is relieved from all this secrecy, I shall not cease to feel uneasy as to her welfare. I am glad, however, that the issue of events has exonerated her husband from any part in her disappearance.’

He was glad to know this—glad to know that however base a traitor to himself, John Saltram had not been guilty of that deeper villainy which he had at times been led to suspect.

Gilbert Fenton left Mr. Medler’s office a happier man than when he had entered it, and yet

only half satisfied. It was a great thing to know that Marian was safe; but he would have wished her in the keeping of any one rather than of him whom the world would have called her natural protector.

Nor was his opinion of Mr. Medller by any means an exalted one. No assertion of that gentleman inspired him with heartfelt confidence; and he had not left the lawyer's office long before he began to ask himself whether there was truth in any portion of the story he had heard, or whether he was not the dupe of a lie.

Strange that Marian's father should have returned at so opportune a moment; still more strange that Marian should suddenly desert the husband she had so devotedly loved, and cast in her lot with a father of whom she knew nothing but his unkindness. What if this man Medller had been lying to him from first to last, and was plotting to get old Jacob Nowell's fortune into his own hands?

'I must find her,' Gilbert said to himself; 'I must be certain that she is in safe hands. I shall know no rest till I have found her.'

Harassed and perplexed beyond measure, he walked through the busy streets of that central

district for some time without knowing where he was going, and without the faintest purpose in his steps. Then the notion suddenly flashed upon him that he might hear something of Percival Nowell at the shop in Queen-Anne's-court, supposing the old business to be still carried on there under the sway of Mr. Tulliver; and it seemed too early yet for the probability of any change in that quarter.

Gilbert was in the Strand when this notion occurred to him. He turned his steps immediately, and went back to Wardour-street, and thence to the dingy court where he had first discovered Marian's grandfather.

There was no change; the shop looked exactly the same as it had looked in the lifetime of Jacob Nowell. There were the same old guineas in the wooden bowl, the same tarnished tankards and teapots on view behind the wire-guarded glass, the same obscure hints of untold riches within, in the general aspect of the place.

Mr. Tulliver darted forward from his usual lurking-place as Gilbert went in at the door.

‘O!’ he exclaimed, with undisguised disappointment, ‘it's you, is it, sir? I thought it was a customer.’

‘I am sorry to disappoint your expectation of profit. I have looked in to ask you two or three questions, Mr. Tulliver; that is all.’

‘Any information in my power I’m sure I shall be happy to afford, sir. Won’t you be pleased to take a seat?’

‘How long is it since you saw Mr. Nowell, your former employer’s son?’ Gilbert asked, dropping into the chair indicated by the shopman, and coming at once to the point.

Mr. Tulliver was somewhat startled by the question. That was evident, though he was not a man who wore his heart upon his sleeve.

‘How long is it since I’ve seen Mr. Nowell, Mr. Percival Nowell, sir?’ he repeated, staring thoughtfully at his questioner.

‘Yes; you need not be afraid to speak freely to me; I know Mr. Nowell is in London.’

‘Well, sir, I’ve not seen him often since his father’s death.’

Since his father’s death! And according to Mr. Medller, Jacob Nowell’s son had only arrived in England after the old man’s death;—or stay, the lawyer had declared that he had been only aware of Percival’s return within the last two or

three weeks. That was a different thing, of course ; yet was it likely this man could have returned, and his father's lawyer have remained ignorant of his arrival ?

Gilbert did not allow the faintest expression of surprise to appear on his countenance.

‘ Not often since your master's death ; but how often before ? ’

‘ Well, he used to come in pretty often before the old man died ; but they were both of 'em precious close. Mr. Percival never let out that he was my master's son, but I guessed as much before he'd been here many times.’

‘ How was it that I never came across him ? ’

‘ Chance, I suppose ; but he's a deep one. If you'd happened to come in when he was here, I daresay he'd have contrived to slip away somehow without your seeing him.’

‘ When did he come here last ? ’ asked Gilbert.

‘ About a fortnight ago. He came with Mr. Medler the lawyer, who introduced him formally as my master's son ; and they took possession of the place between them for Mrs. Holbrook, making an arrangement with me to carry on the business, and making precious hard terms too.’

‘Have you seen Mrs. Holbrook since that morning when she left London for Hampshire, immediately after her grandfather’s death?’

‘Never set eyes on her since then ; but she’s in London, they told me, living with her father. She came up to claim the property. I say, the husband must be rather a curious party, mustn’t he, to stand that kind of thing, and part company with her just when she’s come into a fortune ?’

‘Have you any notion where Mrs. Holbrook or her father is to be found ? I should be glad to make you a handsome present if you could enlighten me upon that point.’

‘I wish I could, sir. No, I haven’t the least idea where the gentleman hangs out. Oysters ain’t closer than that party. I thought he’d get his paw upon his father’s money, somehow, when I used to see him hanging about this place. But I don’t believe the old man ever meant him to have a sixpence of it.’

There was very little satisfaction to be obtained from Mr. Tulliver ; and except as to the one fact of Percival Nowell’s return, Gilbert left Queen-Anne’s-court little wiser than when he entered it.

Brooding upon the revelations of that day as he walked slowly westward, he began to think that Percival and Mr. Medler had been in league from the time of the prodigal son's return, and that his own exclusion from the will as executor, and the substitution of the lawyer's name, had been brought about for no honourable purpose. What would a weak inexperienced woman be between two such men? or what power could Marian have, once under her father's influence, to resist his will? How she had fallen under that influence so completely as to leave her husband and her quiet country home, without a word of explanation, was a difficult question to answer; and Gilbert Fenton meditated upon it with a troubled mind.

He walked westward, indifferent where he went in the perplexity of his thoughts, anxious to walk-off a little of his excitement if he could, and to return to his sick charge in the Temple in a calmer frame of mind. It was something gained, at the worst, to be able to return to John Saltram's bedside freed from that hideous suspicion which had tormented him of late.

Walking thus, he found himself towards the

close of the brief winter day at the Marble Arch. He went through the gate into the empty Park, and was crossing the broad road near the entrance, when an open carriage passed close beside him, and a woman's voice called to the coachman to stop.

The carriage stopped so abruptly and so near him that he paused and looked up, in natural wonderment at the circumstance. A lady dressed in mourning was leaning forward out of the carriage, looking eagerly after him. A second glance showed him that this lady was Mrs. Branston.

'How do you do, Mr. Fenton?' she cried, holding out her little black-gloved hand. 'What an age since I have seen you! But you have not forgotten me, I hope?'

'That is quite impossible, Mrs. Branston. If I had not been very much absorbed in thought just now, I should have recognised you sooner. It was very kind of you to stop to speak to me.'

'Not at all. I have something most particular to say to you. If you are not in a very great hurry, would you mind getting into the carriage, and letting me drive you round the Park? I can't keep you standing in the road to talk.'

'I am in no especial hurry, and I shall be

most happy to take a turn round the Park with you.'

Mrs. Branston's footman opened the carriage-door, and Gilbert took his seat opposite the widow, who was enjoying her afternoon drive alone for once in a way ; a propitious toothache having kept Mrs. Pallinson within doors.

'I have been expecting to see you for ever so long, Mr. Fenton. Why do you never call upon me ?' the pretty little widow began, with her usual frankness.

'I have been so closely occupied lately ; and even if I had not been so, I should have scarcely expected to find you in town at this unfashionable season.'

'I don't care the least in the world for fashion,' Mrs. Branston said, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. 'That is only an excuse of yours, Mr. Fenton ; you completely forgot my existence, I have no doubt. All my friends desert me now-adays—older friends than you. There is Mr. Sal-tram, for instance. I have not seen him for—O, not for ever so long,' concluded the widow, blushing in the dusk as she remembered that visit of hers to the Temple—that daring step which ought

to have brought John Saltram so much nearer to her, but which had resulted in nothing but disappointment and regret—bitter regret that she should have cast her womanly pride into the very dust at this man's feet to no purpose.

But Adela Branston was not a proud woman ; and even in the midst of her regret for having done this foolish thing, she was always ready to make excuses for the man she loved, always in danger of committing some new folly in his behalf.

Gilbert Fenton felt for the poor foolish little woman, whose fair face was turned to him with such a pleading look in the wintry twilight. He knew that what he had to tell her must needs carry desolation to her heart—knew that in the background of John Saltram's life there lurked even a deeper cause of grief for this gentle impressionable little soul.

‘ You will not wonder that Mr. Saltram has not called upon you lately when you know the truth,’ he said gravely : ‘ he has been very ill.’

Mrs. Branston clasped her hands, with a faint cry of terror.

‘ Very ill—that means dangerously ill ?’

‘Yes; for some time he was in great danger. I believe that is past now; but I am not quite sure of his safety even yet. I can only hope that he may recover.’

Hope that he might recover, yes; but to be a friend of his, Gilbert’s, never more. It was a dreary prospect at best. John Saltram would recover, to seek and reclaim his wife, and then those two must needs pass for ever out of Gilbert Fenton’s life. The story would be finished, and his own part of it bald enough to be told on the fly-leaf at the end of the book.

Mrs. Branston bore the shock of his ill news better than Gilbert had expected. There is good material even in the weakest of womankind when the heart is womanly and true.

She was deeply shocked, intensely sorry; and she made no attempt to mask her sorrow by any conventional speech or pretence whatsoever. She made Gilbert give her all the details of John Saltram’s illness, and when he had told her all, asked him plainly if she might be permitted to see the sick man.

‘Do let me see him, if it is possible,’ she said; ‘it would be such a comfort to me to see him.’

‘ I do not say such a thing is not possible, my dear Mrs. Branston ; but I am sure it would be very foolish.’

‘ O, never mind that ; I am always doing foolish things. It would be only one folly more, and would hardly count in my history. Dear Mr. Fenton, do let me see him.’

‘ I don’t think you quite know what you are asking, Mrs. Branston. Such a sick-bed as John Saltram’s would be a most painful scene for you. He has been delirious from the beginning of his illness, and is so still. He rarely has an interval of anything like consciousness, and in all the time that I have been with him has never yet recognised me ; indeed, there are moments when I am inclined to fear that his brain may be permanently deranged.’

‘ God forbid !’ exclaimed Adela, in a voice that was choked with tears.

‘ Yes, such a result as that would be indeed a sore calamity. I have every wish to set your mind at ease, believe me, Mrs. Branston ; but in John Saltram’s present state I am sure it would be ill-advised for you to see him.’

‘ Of course I cannot press the question if you

say that,' Adela answered despondently ; 'but I should have been so glad if you could have allowed me to see him. Not that I pretend to the smallest right to do so ; but we were very good friends once—before my husband's death. He has changed to me strangely since that time.'

Gilbert felt that it was almost cruel to keep this poor little soul in utter ignorance of the truth. He did not consider himself at liberty to say much ; but some vague word of warning might serve as a slight check upon the waste of feeling which was going on in the widow's heart.

' There may be a reason for that change, Mrs. Branston,' he said. ' Mr. Saltram may have formed some tie of a kind to withdraw him from all other friendships.'

' Some attachment, you mean !' exclaimed the widow ; ' some other attachment,' she added, forgetting how much the words betrayed. ' Do you think that, Mr. Fenton ? Do you think that John Saltram has some secret love-affair upon his mind ?'

' I have some reason to suspect as much, from words that he has dropped during his delirium.'

There was a look of unspeakable pain in Mrs. Branston's face, which had grown deadly pale when

Gilbert first spoke of John Saltram's illness. The pretty childish lips quivered a little, and her companion knew that she was suffering keenly.

'Have you any idea who the lady is?' she asked quietly, and with more self-command than Gilbert had expected from her.

'I have some idea.'

'It is no one whom I know, I suppose?'

'The lady is quite a stranger to you.'

'He might have trusted me,' she said mournfully; 'it would have been kinder in him to have trusted me.'

'Yes, Mrs. Branston; but Mr. Saltram has unfortunately made concealment the policy of his life. He will find it a false policy sooner or later.'

'It was very cruel of him not to tell me the truth. He might have known that I should look kindly upon any one he cared for. I may be a very foolish woman, Mr. Fenton, but I am not ungenerous.'

'I am sure of that,' Gilbert said warmly, touched by her candour.

'You must let me know every day how your friend is going on, Mr. Fenton,' Adela said after

a pause ; ‘ I shall consider it a very great favour if you will do so.’

‘ I will not fail.’

They had returned to Cumberland-gate by this time, and at Gilbert’s request Mrs. Branston allowed him to be set down near the Arch. He called a cab, and drove to the Temple; while poor Adela went back to the splendid gloom of Caven-dish-square, with all the fabric of her future life shattered.

Until this hour she had looked upon John Saltram’s fidelity to herself as a certainty; she knew, now that her hope was slain all at once, what a living thing it had been, and how great a portion of her own existence had taken its colour therefrom.

It was fortunate for Mrs. Branston that Mrs. Pallinson’s toothache, and the preparations and medicaments supplied to her by her son—all declared to be infallible, and all ending in ignominious failure—occupied that lady’s attention at this period, to the exclusion of every other thought, or Adela’s pale face might have excited more curiosity than it did. As it was, the matron contented herself by making some rather snappish

remarks upon the folly of going out to drive late on a January afternoon, and retired to administer poultices and cataplasms to herself in the solitude of her own apartment soon after dinner, leaving Adela Branston free to ponder upon John Salttram's cruelty.

‘If he had only trusted me,’ she said to herself more than once during those mournful meditations ; ‘if he had only given me credit for some little good sense and generosity, I should not feel it as keenly as I do. He must have known that I loved him—yes, I have been weak enough to let him see that—and I think that once he used to like me a little—in those old happy days when he came so often to Maidenhead. Yes, I believe he almost loved me then.’

And then the thought that this man was lying desperately ill, perhaps in danger of death, blotted out every other thought. It was so bitter to know him in peril, and to be powerless to go to him ; worse than useless to him were she by his side, since it was another whose image haunted his wandering brain—another whose voice he longed to hear.

She spent a sleepless melancholy night, and

had no rest next day, until a commissionnaire brought her a brief note from Gilbert Fenton, telling her that if there were any change at all in the patient, it was on the side of improvement.

CHAPTER III.

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE.

ELLEN CARLEY was not allowed any time to take back the promise given to her father, had she been inclined to do so. Mr. Whitelaw made his appearance at the Grange early in the evening of the 2d of January, with a triumphant simper upon his insipid countenance, which was inexpressibly provoking to the unhappy girl. It was clear to her, at first sight of him, that her father had been at Wyncomb that afternoon, and her hateful suitor came secure of success. His wooing was not a very romantic episode in his commonplace existence. He did not even attempt to see Ellen alone; but after he had been seated for about half an hour in the chimney-corner, nestling close to the fire in a manner he much affected, being of a particularly chilly temperament, given to shiver and turn blue on the smallest provocation, he delivered himself solemnly of the following address :

'I make no doubt, Miss Carley, that you have taken notice for some time past of my sentiments towards yourself. I have never made any secret of those sentiments, neither have I talked much about them, not being a man of many words. I used to fancy myself the very reverse of a marrying man, and I don't say but what at this moment I think the man who lives and dies a bachelor does the wisest for his own comfort and his own prosperity. But we are not the masters of our feelings, Miss Carley. You have growed upon me lately somehow, so that I've got not to care for my life without you. Ask Mrs. Tadman if my appetite hasn't fell-off within this last six months to a degree that has frightened her ; and a man of my regular habits must be very far gone in love, Miss Carley, when his appetite forsakes him. From the time I came to know you as a young woman, in the bloom of a young woman's beauty, I said to myself, "That's the girl I'll marry, and no other." Your father can bear me out in that, for I said the same to him. And finding that I had his approval, I was satisfied to bide my time, and wait till you came round to the same way of thinking. Your father tells me yesterday afternoon, and again

this afternoon, that you have come round to that way of feeling. I hope he hasn't deceived me, Miss Carley.'

This was a very long speech for Stephen Whitelaw. It was uttered in little gasps or snatches of speech, the speaker stopping at the end of every sentence to take breath.

Ellen Carley sat on that side of the comfortable round table most remote from Mr. Whitelaw, deadly pale, with her hands clasped before her. Once she lifted her eyes with a piteous look to her father's face; but he was smoking his pipe solemnly, with his gaze fixed upon the blazing logs in the grate, and contrived not to see that mute despairing appeal. He had not looked at his daughter once since Stephen Whitelaw's arrival, nor had he made any attempt to prepare her for this visit, this rapid consummation of the sacrifice.

'Come, Miss Carley,' said the farmer rather impatiently, after there had been a dead silence of some minutes, 'I want to get an answer direct from your own lips. Your father hasn't been deceiving me, has he ?'

'No,' Ellen said in a low voice, almost as if

the reply were dragged from her by some physical torture. ‘If my father has given you a promise for me, I will keep it. But I don’t want to deceive you, on my part, Mr. Whitelaw,’ she went on in a somewhat firmer tone. ‘I will be your wife, since you and my father have settled that it must be so; but I can promise no more than that. I will be dutiful and submissive to you as a wife, you may be sure—only—’

Mr. Whitelaw smiled, a very significant smile, which implied that it would be his care to insure his wife’s obedience, and that he was troubled by no doubts upon that head.

The bailiff broke-in abruptly at this juncture.

‘Lord bless the girl, what need is there of all this talk about what she will be and what she won’t be? She’ll be as good a wife as any woman in England, I’ll stake my life upon that. She’s been a good daughter, as all the world knows, and a good daughter is bound to make a good wife. Say no more about it, Nell. Steph Whitelaw knows he’ll make no bad bargain in marrying you.’

The farmer received this remark with a loud sniff, expressive of offended dignity.

‘Very likely not, William Carley,’ he said: ‘but it isn’t every man that can make your daughter mistress of such a place as Wyncomb; and such men as could do it would look for money with a wife, however young and pretty she might be. There’s two sides to a bargain, you see, William, and I should like things to be looked at in that light between you and me.’

‘You’ve no call to take offence, Steph,’ answered the bailiff with a conciliating grin. ‘I never said you wasn’t a good match for my girl; but a pretty girl and a prudent clever housekeeper like Nell is a fortune in herself to any man.’

‘Then the matter’s settled, I suppose,’ said Mr. Whitelaw; ‘and the sooner the wedding comes off the better, to my mind. If my wife that is to be wants anything in the way of new clothes, I shall be happy to put down a twenty-pound note—or I’d go as far as thirty—towards ‘em.’

Ellen shook her head impatiently.

‘I want nothing new,’ she said; ‘I have as many things as I care to have.’

‘Nonsense, Nell,’ cried her father, frowning at her in a significant manner to express his disap-

proval of this folly, and in so doing looking at her for the first time since her suitor's advent. 'Every young woman likes new gowns, and of course you'll take Steph's friendly offer, and thank him kindly for it. He knows that I'm pretty hard-up just now, and won't be able to do much for you; and it wouldn't do for Mrs. Whitelaw of Wyncomb to begin the world with a shabby turn-out.'

'Of course not,' replied the farmer; 'I'll bring you the cash to-morrow evening, Nell; and the sooner you buy your wedding-gown the better. There's nothing to wait for, you see. I've got a good home to take you to. Mother Tadman will march, of course, between this and my wedding-day. I sha'n't want her when I've a wife to keep house for me.'

'Of course not,' said the bailiff. 'Relations are always dangerous about a place—ready to make mischief at every hand's turn.'

'O, Mr. Whitelaw, you won't turn her out surely—your own flesh and blood, and after so many years of service. She told me how hard she had worked for you.'

'Ah, that's just like her,' growled the farmer.

‘ I give her a comfortable home for all these years, and then she grumbles about the work.’

‘ She didn’t grumble,’ said Ellen hastily. ‘ She only told me how faithfully she had served you.’

‘ Yes ; that comes to the same thing. I should have thought you would have liked to be mistress of your house, Nell, without any one to interfere with you.’

‘ Mrs. Tadman is nothing to me,’ answered Ellen, who had been by no means prepossessed by that worthy matron ; ‘ but I shouldn’t like her to be unfairly treated on my account.’

‘ Well, we’ll think about it, Nell ; there’s no hurry. She’s worth her salt, I daresay.’

Mr. Whitelaw seemed to derive a kind of satisfaction from the utterance of his newly-betrothed’s Christian name, which came as near the rapture of a lover as such a sluggish nature might be supposed capable of. To Ellen there was something hideous in the sound of her own name spoken by those hateful lips ; but he had a sovereign right so to address her, now and for evermore. Was she not his goods, his chattels, bought with a price, as much as a horse at a fair ?

That nothing might be wanting to remind her

of the sordid bargain, Mr. Whitelaw drew a small canvas bag from his pocket presently—a bag which gave forth that pleasant chinking sound that is sweet to the ears of so many as the music of gold—and handed it across the hearth to William Carley.

‘I’m as good as my word, you see,’ he said with a complacent air of patronage. ‘There’s the favour you asked me for; I’ll take your I O U for it presently, if it’s all the same to you—as a matter of form—and to be given back to you upon my wedding-day.’

The bailiff nodded assent, and dropped the bag into his pocket with a sigh of relief. And then the two men went on smoking their pipes in the usual stolid way, dropping out a few words now and then by way of social converse; and there was nothing in Mr. Whitelaw’s manner to remind Ellen that she had bound herself to the awful apprenticeship of marriage without love. But when he took his leave that night he approached her with such an evident intention of kissing her as could not be mistaken by the most inexperienced of maidens. Poor Ellen indulged in no girlish resistance, no pretty little comedy

of alarm and surprise, but surrendered her pale lips to the hateful salute with the resignation of a martyr. It was better that she should suffer this than that her father should go to gaol. That thought was never absent from her mind. Nor was this sacrifice to filial duty quite free from the leaven of selfishness. For her own sake, as much as for her father's, Ellen Carley would have submitted to any penalty rather than disgrace. To have him branded as a thief must needs be worse suffering than any lifelong penance she might endure in matrimony. To lose Frank Randall's love was less than to let him learn her father's guilt.

‘The daughter of a thief!’ she said to herself. ‘How he would despise himself for having ever loved me, if he knew me to be that!’

CHAPTER IV.

COMING ROUND.

POSSESSED with a thorough distrust of Mr. Medler, and only half satisfied as to the fact of Marian's safety, Gilbert Fenton lost no time in seeking professional aid in the work of investigating this perplexing social mystery. He went once more to the metropolitan detective who had been with him in Hampshire, and whose labours there had proved so futile. The task now to be performed seemed easy enough. Mr. Proul (Proul was the name of the gentleman engaged by Gilbert) had only to discover the whereabouts of Percival Nowell; a matter of no great difficulty, Gilbert imagined, since it was most likely that Marian's father had frequent personal communication with the lawyer; nor was it improbable that he would have business with his agent or representative, Mr. Tulliver, in Queen-Anne's-court. Provided with these two addresses, Gilbert fancied that Mr. Proul's work must needs be easy enough.

That gentleman, however, was not disposed to make light of the duty committed to him; whether from a professional habit of exaggerating the importance of any mission undertaken by him, or in perfect singleness of mind, it is not easy to say.

‘It’s a watching business, you see, sir,’ he told Gilbert, ‘and is pretty sure to be tedious. I may put a man to hang about this Mr. Medler’s business all day and every day for a month at a stretch, and he may miss his customer at the last, especially as you can’t give me any kind of description of the man you want.’

‘Surely your agent could get some information out of Medler’s clerk; it’s in his trade to do that kind of thing, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes, sir; I don’t deny that I might put a man on to the clerk, and it might answer. On the other hand, such a gentleman’s clerk would be likely to be uncommon well trained and uncommon little trusted.’

‘But we want to know so little,’ Gilbert exclaimed impatiently; ‘only where this man lives, and who lives with him.’

‘Yes,’ murmured Mr. Proul, rubbing his chin

thoughtfully; 'it ain't much, as you say, and it might be got out of the clerk, if the clerk knows it; but as to Mrs. Holbrook having got away from Hampshire and come to London, that's more than I can believe. I worked that business harder and closer than ever I worked any business yet. You told me to spare neither money nor time, and I didn't spare either; though it was more a question of time than money, for my expenses were light enough, as you know. I don't believe Mrs. Holbrook could have got away from Malsham station up to the time when I left Hampshire. I'm pretty certain she couldn't have left the place any other way than by rail; I'm more than certain she couldn't have been living anywhere in the neighbourhood when I was hunting for her. In short, it comes to this—I stick to my old opinion, that the poor lady was drowned in Malsham river.'

This was just what Gilbert, happily for his own peace, could not bring himself to believe. He was ready to confide in Mr. Medler as a model of truth and honesty, rather than to admit the possibility of Marian's death.

'We have this man Medler's positive asser-

tion, that Mrs. Holbrook is with her father, you see, Mr. Proul,' he said doubtfully.

' *That* for Medler's assertion !' exclaimed the detective contemptuously ; ' there are lawyers in London who will assert anything for a consideration. Let him produce the lady ; and if he does produce her, I give him leave to say that Thomas Henry Proul is incapable of his business ; or, putting it in vulgar English, that T. H. P. is a duffer. Of course I shall carry out any business you like to trust me with, Mr. Fenton, and carry it out thoroughly. I'll set a watch upon Mr. Medler's offices, and I'll circumvent him by means of his clerk, if I can ; but it's my rooted conviction that Mrs. Holbrook never left Hampshire.'

This was discouraging ; and with that ready power to adapt itself to circumstances which is a distinguishing characteristic of the human mind, Gilbert Fenton began to entertain a very poor opinion of the worthy Proul's judgment. But not knowing any better person whose aid he could enlist in this business, he was fain to confide his chances of success to that gentleman, and to wait with all patience for the issue of events. Much

of this dreary interval of perpetual doubt and suspense was spent beside John Saltram's sick bed. There were strangely mingled feelings in the watcher's breast ; a pitying regret that struggled continually with his natural anger ; a tender remembrance of past friendship, which he despised as a shameful weakness in his nature, but could not banish from his mind, as he sat in the stillness of the sick-room, watching the helpless creature who had once kept as faithful a vigil for him.

To John Saltram's recovery he looked also as to his best chance of restoring Marian to her natural home. The influence that he himself was powerless to bring to bear upon Percival Nowell's daughter might be easily exerted by her husband.

‘ She was lured away from him, perhaps, by some specious lie of her father's, some cruel slander of the husband. There had been bitter words between them. Saltram has betrayed as much in his wandering talk ; but to the last there was no feeling but love for him in her heart. Ellen Carley is my witness for that ; nothing less than some foul lie could have tempted her away from him.’

In the mean time, pending the sick man's

recovery, the grand point was to discover the whereabouts of Marian and her father; and for this discovery Gilbert was compelled to trust to the resources of the accomplished Proul. So eager was he for the result, that if he could have kept a watch upon Mr. Medler's office with his own eyes, he would have done so; but this being out of the question, and the more prudent course a complete avoidance of the lawyer's neighbourhood, he could only await the result of his paid agent's researches, in the hope that Mr. Nowell was still in London, and would have need of frequent communication with his late father's solicitor. The first month of the year dragged itself slowly to an end, and the great city underwent all those pleasing alternations, from snow to mud, from the slipperiness of a city paved with plate-glass to the sloppiness of a metropolis ankle-deep in a rich brown compound of about the consistency and colour of mock-turtle soup, which are common to great cities at this season; and still John Saltram lingered on in the shabby solitude of his Temple chambers, slowly mending, Mr. Mew declared, towards the end of the month, and in a fair way towards recovery. The time

came at last when the fevered mind began to cease from its perpetual wanderings; when the weary brain, sorely enfeebled by its long interval of unnatural activity, dropped suddenly into a state of calm that was akin to apathy.

The change came with an almost alarming suddenness. It was at the beginning of February, close upon the dead small hours of a bleak windy night, and Gilbert was keeping watch alone in the sick-room, while the professional nurse slept comfortably on the sofa in the sitting-room. It was his habit now to spend the early part of the night in such duty as this, and to go home to bed between four and five in the morning, at which time the nurse was ready to relieve guard.

He had been listening to the dismal howling of the winds, threatening damage to neighbouring chimney-pots of rickety constitution, thinking idly of the men that had come and gone amidst those old buildings, and how few amongst them all had left any mark behind them; inclined to speculate too how many of them had been men capable of better work than they had done, only carelessly indifferent to the doing of it, like him who lay on that bed yonder, with one muscular

arm, powerful even in its wasted condition, thrown wearily above his head, and an undefinable look, that seemed half pain, half fatigue, upon his haggard face.

Suddenly, while Gilbert Fenton was meditating in this idle desultory manner, the sleeper awakened, looked full at him, and called him by his name.

‘Gilbert,’ he said very quietly, ‘is it really you?’

It was the first time, in all his long watches by that bed, that John Saltram had recognised him. The sick man had talked of him often in his delirium; but never before had he looked his former friend in the face with one ray of recognition in his own. An indescribable thrill of pain went through Gilbert’s heart at the sound of that calm utterance of his name. How sweet it would have been to him, what a natural thing it would have seemed, to have fallen upon his old friend’s breast and wept aloud in the deep joy of this recovery! But they were friends no longer. He had to remember how base a traitor this man had been to him.

‘Yes, John, it is I.’

‘And you have been here for a long time. O God, how many months have I been lying here? The time seems endless; and there have been so many people round me—a crowd of strange faces—all enemies, all against me. And people in the next room—that was the worst of all. I have never seen them, but I have always known that they were there. They could not deceive me as to that—hiding behind that door, and watching me as I lay here. You might have turned them out, Gilbert,’ he added peevishly; ‘it seems a hard thing that you could let them stay there to torment me.’

‘There has been no one in either of the rooms, John; no one but myself and the hired nurse, the doctors, and Mrs. Pratt now and then. These people have no existence out of your sick fancy. You have been very ill, delirious, for a long time. I thank God that your reason has been restored to you; yes, I thank God with all my heart for that.’

‘Have I been mad?’ the other asked.

‘Your mind has wandered. But that has passed at last with the fever, as the doctors hoped it might. You are calm now, and must try to

keep yourself quiet ; there must be no more talk between us to-night.'

The sick man took no notice of this injunction ; but for the time was not disobedient, and lay for some minutes staring at the watcher's face with a strange half-vacant smile upon his own.

' Gilbert,' he said at last, ' what have they done with my wife ? Why has she been kept away from me ?'

' Your wife ? Marian ?'

' Yes, Marian. You know her name, surely. Did she know that I was ill, and yet stayed away from me ?'

' Was her place here, John Saltram ?—that poor girl whom you married under a false name, whom you tried to hide from all the world. Have you ever brought her here ? Have you ever given her a wife's license, or a wife's place ? How many lies have you not told to hide that which any honest man would have been proud to confess to all the world ?'

' Yes, I have lied to you about her, I have hidden my treasure. But it was for your sake, Gilbert ; it was for the sake of our old friendship. I could not bear to lose you ; I could not bear to

stand revealed before you as the weak wretch who betrayed your trust and stole your promised wife. Yes, Gilbert, I have been guilty beyond all measure. I have looked you in the face and told you lies. I wanted to keep you for my friend; I could not stand the thought of a life-long breach between us. Gilbert, old friend, have pity on me. I was weak—wicked, if you like—but I loved you very dearly.'

He stretched out his bony hand with an appealing gesture, but it was not taken. Gilbert sat with his head turned away, his face hidden from the sick man.

' Anything would have been better than the course you chose,' he said at last in a very quiet voice. ' If she loved you better than me—than me, who would have thought it so small a thing to lay down my life for her happiness, or to stand aloof and keep the secret of my broken heart while I blest her as the cherished wife of another—if you had certain reason to be sure she loved you, you should have asserted your right to claim her love like a man, and should have been prompt to tell me the bitter truth. I am a man, and would have borne the blow as a man should bear it. But to

sneak into my place behind my back, to steal her away from me, to marry her under a false name—a step that might go far to invalidate the marriage, by the way—and then leave me to piece-out the broken story, syllable by syllable, to suffer all the torture of a prolonged suspense, all the wasted passion of anger and revenge against an imaginary enemy, to find at last that the man I had loved and trusted, honoured and admired beyond all other men throughout the best years of my life, was the man who had struck this secret blow—it was the conduct of a villain and a coward, John Saltram. I have no words to speak my contempt for so base a betrayal. And when I remember your pretended sympathy, your friendly counsel—O God ! it was the work of a social Judas ; nothing was wanted but the kiss.'

‘Yes,’ the other answered with a faint bitter laugh ; ‘it was very bad. Once having begun, you see, it was but to add one lie to another. Anything seemed better than to tell you the truth. I fancied your devotion for Marian would wear itself out much sooner than it did—that you would marry some one else ; and then I thought, when you were happy, and had forgotten that old fancy,

I would have confessed the truth, and told you it was your friend who was your rival. It might have seemed easy to you to forgive me under those happier circumstances, and so our old friendship might never have been broken. I waited for that, Gilbert. Don't suppose that it was not painful to me to act so base a part; don't suppose that I did not suffer. I did—in a hundred ways. You have seen the traces of that slow torture in my face. In every way I had sinned from my weak desire to win my love and yet keep my friend; and God knows the burden of my sin has been heavy upon me. I will tell you some day—if ever I am strong enough for so many words, and if you will hear me out patiently—the whole story of my temptation; how I struggled against it, and only gave way at last when life seemed insupportable to me without the woman I loved.'

After this he lay quiet again for some minutes, exhausted by having spoken so long. All the factitious strength, which had made him loud and violent in his delirium, was gone; he seemed as weak as a sick child.

‘Where is she?’ he asked at last; ‘why

doesn't she come to me ? You have not answered that question.'

' I have told you that her place is not here,' Gilbert replied evasively. ' You have no right to expect her here, never having given her the right to come.'

' No ; it is my own fault. She is in Hampshire still, I suppose. Poor girl, I would give the world to see her dear face looking down at me. I must get well and go back to her. When shall I be strong enough to travel ?—to-morrow, or if not to-morrow, the next day : surely the next day—eh, Gilbert ?'

He raised himself in the bed in order to read the answer in Gilbert's face, but fell back upon the pillows instantly, exhausted by the effort. Memory had only returned to him in part. It was clear that he had forgotten the fact of Marian's disappearance,—a fact of which he had seemed half-conscious long ago in his delirium.

' How did you find out that Marian was my wife ?' he asked presently, with perfect calmness. ' Who betrayed my secret ?'

' Your own lips, in your delirious talk of her, which has been incessant ; and if collateral evi-

dence were needed to confirm your words, this, which I found the other day marking a place in your Shakespeare.'

Gilbert took a scrap of ribbon from his breast, a ribbon with a blue ground and a rosebud on it,—a ribbon which he had chosen himself for Marian, in the brief happy days of their engagement.

John Saltram contemplated the scrap of colour with a smile that was half sombre, half ironical.

‘Yes, it was hers,’ he said; ‘she wore it round that slim swan’s throat of hers; and one morning, when I was leaving her in a particularly weak frame of mind, I took it from her neck and brought it away in my bosom, for the sake of having something about me that she had worn; and then I put it in the book, you see, and forgot all about it. A fitting emblem of my love—full of passion and fervour to-day, at the point of death to-morrow. There have been times when I would have given the world to undo what I had done, when my life seemed blighted by this foolish marriage; and again, happier moments, when my wife was all the universe to me, and I had not a thought or a dream beyond her. God bless

her ! You will let me go to her, Gilbert, the instant I am able to travel, as soon as I can drag myself anyhow from this bed to the railway ? You will not stand between me and my love ?'

‘ No, John Saltram ; God knows, I have never thought of that.’

‘ And you knew I was a traitor—you knew it was my work that had destroyed your scheme of happiness—and yet have been beside me, watching me patiently through this wretched illness ?’

‘ That was a small thing to do. You did as much, and a great deal more, for me, when I was ill in Egypt. It was a mere act of duty.’

‘ Not of friendship. It was Christian charity, eh, Gilbert ? If thine enemy hunger, feed him ; if he thirst, give him drink ; and so on. It was not the act of a friend ?’

‘ No, John Saltram, between you and me there can never again be any such word as friendship. What little I have done for you I think I would have done for a stranger, had I found a stranger as helpless and unfriended as I found you. I am quite sure that to have done less would have

been to neglect a sacred duty. There is no question of obligation. Till you are on your feet again, a strong man, I will stand by you; when that time comes, we part for ever.'

John Saltram sank back upon his pillow with a heavy sigh, but uttered no protest against this sentence. And this was all that came of Gilbert's vengeful passion against the man who had wronged him; this was the end of a long-cherished anger. 'A lame and impotent conclusion,' perhaps, but surely the only end possible under the circumstances. He could not wage war against a feeble creature, whose hold on life was still an uncertainty; he could not forget his promise to Marian, that no harm should come to her husband through any act of his. So he sat quietly by the bedside of his prostrate foe, watched him silently as he fell into a brief restless slumber, and administered his medicine when he woke with a hand that was as gentle as a woman's.

Between four and five o'clock the nurse came in from the next room to take her place, refreshed by a sleep of several hours; and then Gilbert departed in the chill gloom of the winter's morning, still as dark as night,—departed with his

mind lightened of a great load; for it had been very terrible to him to think that the man who had once been his friend might go down to the grave without an interval of reason.

CHAPTER V.

A FULL CONFESSION.

GILBERT did not go to the Temple again till he had finished his day's work at St. Helens, and had eaten his modest dinner at a tavern in Fleet-street. He found that Mr. Mew had already paid his second visit to the sick-room, and had pronounced himself much relieved and delighted by the favourable change.

‘I have no fear now,’ he had said to the nurse. ‘It is now only a question of getting back the physical strength, which has certainly fallen to a very low ebb. Perfect repose and an entire freedom from care are what we have to look to.’

This the nurse told Gilbert. ‘He has been very restless all day,’ she added, ‘though I've done what I could to keep him quiet. But he worries himself, now that his senses have come back, poor gentleman ; and it isn't easy to soothe him any way. He keeps on wondering when he'll

be well enough to move, and so on, over and over again. Once, when I left the room for a minute and went back again, I found him attempting to get out of bed—only to try his strength, he said. But he's no more strength than a new-born baby, poor soul, and it will be weeks before he's able to stir. If he worries and frets, he'll put himself back for a certainty; but I daresay you'll have more influence over him than I, sir, and that you may be able to keep him quiet.'

'I doubt that,' answered Gilbert; 'but I'll do my best. Has he been delirious to-day?'

'No, sir, not once; and of course that's a great thing gained.'

A feeble voice from the inner room called Gilbert by name presently, and he went in at its bidding.

'Is that you, Gilbert? Come in, for pity's sake. I was sure of the voice. So you have come on your errand of charity once more. I am very glad to see you, though you are not my friend. Sit down, ministering Christian, sit by my side; I have some questions to ask you.'

'You must not talk much, John. The doctor insists upon perfect tranquillity.'

'He might just as well insist upon my mak-

ing myself Emperor of all the Russias ; one demand would be about as reasonable as the other. How long have I been lying here like a log—a troublesome log, by the way ; for I find from some hints the nurse dropped to-day as to the blessing of my recovery, that I have been somewhat given to violence ;—how long have I been ill, Gilbert ?

‘A very long time.’

‘Give me a categorical answer. How many weeks and days ?’

‘You were taken ill about the middle of December, and we are now in the first week of February.’

‘Nearly two months ; and in all that time I have been idle—*ergo*, no remittances from publishers. How have I lived, Gilbert ? How have the current expenses of my illness been paid ? And the children of Israel—have they not been clamorous ? There was a bill due in January, I know. I was working for that when I got pulled up. How is it that my vile carcass is not in their hands ?’

‘You need give yourself no trouble ; the bill has been taken up.’

‘By you, of course? Yes; you do not deny it. And you have been spending your money day by day to keep me alive. But then you would have done as much for a stranger. Great heaven, what a mean hound I seem to myself, as I lie here and think what you have done for me, and how I have acted towards you!’ He turned himself in his bed with a great effort, and lay with his face to the wall. ‘Let me hide my face from you,’ he said; ‘I am a shameful creature.’

‘Believe me, once more, there is not the faintest shadow of an obligation,’ Gilbert responded eagerly; ‘I can very well afford anything I have done; shall never feel myself the poorer for it by a sixpence. I cannot bear that these things should be spoken of between us. You know how often I have begged you to let me help you in the past, and how wounded I have been by your refusal.’

‘Yes, when we were friends, before I had ever wronged you. If I had taken your help then, I should hardly have felt the obligation. But, stay, I am not such a pauper as I seem. My wife will have money; at least you told me that the old man was rich.’

‘Yes, your wife will have money, plenty of money. You have no need to trouble yourself about financial matters. You have only to consider what the doctor has said. Your recovery depends almost entirely upon your tranquillity of mind. If you want to get well speedily, you must remember this.’

‘I do want to get well. I am in a fever to get well; I want to see my wife. But my recovery will be evidently a tedious affair. I cannot wait to see her till I am strong enough to travel. Why should she not come to me here? She can—she must come. Write to her, Gilbert; tell her how I languish for her presence; tell her how ill I have been.’

‘Yes; I will write by and by.’

‘By and by! Your tone tells me that you do not mean what you say. There is something you are keeping from me. O, my God, what was that happened before I was ill? My wife was missing. I was hunting for her without rest for nearly a week; and then they told me she was drowned, that there was no hope of finding her. Was that real, Gilbert? or only a part of my delirium? Speak to me, for pity’s sake. Was it real?’

‘Yes, John ; your perplexity and trouble were real, but unnecessary ; your wife is safe.’

‘Safe ? Where ?’

‘She is with her father.’

‘She did not even know that her father was living.’

‘No, not till very lately. He has come home from America, it seems, and Marian is now under his protection.’

‘What ! she could desert me without a word of warning—without the faintest hint of her intention—to go to a father of whom she knew nothing, or nothing that was not eminently to his discredit !’

‘There may have been some strong influence brought to bear to induce her to take such a step.’

‘What influence ?’

‘Do not worry yourself about that now ; make all haste to get well, and then it will be easy for you to win her back.’

‘Yes ; only place me face to face with her, and I do not think there would be much question as to that. But that she should forsake me of her own free will ! It is so unlike my Marian—my patient, long-suffering Marian ; I can scarcely

believe such a thing possible. But that question can soon be put at rest. Write to her, Gilbert; tell her that I have been at death's door; that my chance of recovery hangs upon her will. Father or no father, *that* will bring her to my side.'

'I will do so, directly I know her address.'

'You do not know where she is?'

'Not yet. I am expecting to obtain that information every day. I have taken measures to ascertain where she is.'

'And how do you know that she is with her father?'

'I have the lawyer's authority for that; a lawyer whom the old man, Jacob Nowell, trusted, whom he left sole executor to his will.'

It was necessary above all things that John Saltram's mind should be set at rest; and in order to secure this result Gilbert was fain to affect a supreme faith in Mr. Medler.

'You believe this man, Gilbert?' the invalid asked anxiously.

'Of course. He has no reason for deceiving me.'

'But why withhold the father's address?'

'It is easy enough to conjecture his reasons

for that; a dread of your influence robbing him of his daughter. Her fortune has made her a prize worth disputing, you see. It is natural enough that the father should wish to hide her from you.'

'For the sake of the money?—yes, I suppose that is the beginning and end of his scheme. My poor girl! No doubt he has told her all manner of lies about me, and so contrived to estrange that faithful heart. Will you insert an advertisement in the *Times*, Gilbert, under initials, telling her of my illness, and entreating her to come to me?'

'I will do so if you like; but I daresay Nowell will be cautious enough to keep the advertisement-sheet away from her, or to watch it pretty closely, and prevent her seeing anything we may insert. I am taking means to find them, John; I must entreat you to rest satisfied with that.'

'Rest satisfied, when I am uncertain whether I shall ever see my wife again! That is a hard thing to do.'

'If you harass yourself, you will not live to see her again. Trust in me, John; Marian's safety is as dear to me as it can be to you. I am

her sworn friend and brother, her self-appointed guardian and defender. I have skilled agents at work ; we shall find her, rely upon it.'

It was a strange position into which Gilbert found himself drifting ; the consoler of this man who had so basely robbed him. They could never be friends again, these two ; he had told himself that, not once, but many times during the weary hours of his watching beside John Saltram's sick-bed. They could never more be friends ; and yet he found himself in a manner compelled to perform the offices of friendship. Nor was it easy to preserve anything like the neutral standing which he had designed for himself. The life of this sometime friend of his hung by so frail a link, he had such utter need of kindness ; so what could Gilbert do but console him for the loss of his wife, and endeavour to inspire him with a hopeful spirit about her ? What could he do less than friendship would have done, although his affection for this old friend of his youth had perished for evermore ? The task of consolation was not an easy one. Once restored to his right mind, with a vivid sense of all that had happened to him before his illness, John Saltram was not to be beguiled

into a false security. The idea that his wife was in dangerous hands pursued him perpetually, and the consciousness of his own impotence to rescue her goaded him to a kind of mental fever.

‘To be chained here, Gilbert, lying on this odious bed like a log, when she needs my help ! How am I to bear it ?’

‘Like a man,’ the other answered quietly. ‘Were you as well as I am this moment, there’s nothing you could do that I am not doing. Do you think I should sit idly here, if the best measures had not been taken to find your wife ?’

‘Forgive me. Yes; I have no doubt you have done what is best. But if I were astir, I should have the sense of doing something. I could urge on those people you employ; work with them even.’

‘You would be more likely to hinder than to assist them. They know their work, and it is a slow drudging business at best, which requires more patience than you possess. No, John, there is nothing to be done but to wait, and put our trust in Providence and in time.’

This was a sermon which Gilbert Fenton had occasion to preach very often in the slow weary

days that followed John Saltram's recovery of his right senses. The sick man, tossing to and fro upon the bed he loathed with such an utter loathing, could not refrain from piteous bewailings of his helplessness. He was not a good subject for sickness, had never served his apprenticeship to a sick-bed until now, and the ordeal seemed to him a very long one. In all that period of his delirious wanderings there had been an exaggerated sense of time in his mind. It seemed to him that he had been lying there for years, lost in a labyrinth of demented fancies. Looking back at that time, now that his reason had been restored to him, he was able to recall his delusions one by one, and it was very difficult for him to understand, even now, that they were all utterly groundless, the mere vagabondage of a wandering brain ; that the people he had fancied close at hand, lurking in the next room—he had rarely seen them close about his bed, but had been possessed with a vivid sense of their neighbourhood—had been never near him ; that the old friends and associates of his boyhood, who had been amongst these fancied visitors, were for the greater number dead and passed away long before this time ; that he

had been, in every dream and every fancy of that weary interval, the abject slave of his own hallucinations. Little by little his strength came back to him by very slow degrees—so slowly, indeed, that the process of recovery might have sorely tried the patience of any man less patient than Gilbert. There came a day at last when the convalescent was able to leave his bed for an hour or so, just strong enough to crawl into the sitting-room with the help of Gilbert's arm, and to sit in an easy-chair, propped up by pillows, very feeble of aspect, and with a wan haggard countenance that pleaded mutely for pity. It was impossible to harbour revengeful feelings against a wretch so stricken.

Mr. Mew was much elated by this gradual improvement in his patient, and confessed to Gilbert, in private, that he had never hoped for so happy a result. 'Nothing but an iron constitution, and your admirable care, could have carried our friend through such an attack, sir,' he said decisively. 'And now that we are getting round a little, we must have change of air—change of air and of scene; that is imperatively necessary. Mr. Saltram talks of a loathing for these rooms;

very natural under the circumstances. We must take him away directly he can bear the removal.'

'I rather doubt his willingness to stir,' Gilbert answered thoughtfully. 'He has anxieties that are likely to chain him to London.'

'If there is any objection of that kind it must be conquered,' Mr. Mew said. 'A change will do your friend more good than all the physic I can give him.'

'Where would you advise me to take him?'

'Not very far. He couldn't stand the fatigue of a long journey. I should take him to some quiet little place near town—the more countrified the better. It isn't a very pleasant season for the country; but in spite of that, the change will do him good.'

Gilbert promised to effect this arrangement, as soon as the patient was well enough to be moved. He would run down to Hampton or Kingston, he told Mr. Mew, in a day or two, and look for suitable lodgings.

'Hampton or Kingston, by all means,' replied the surgeon cheerily. 'Both very pleasant places in their way, and as mild as any neighbourhood within easy reach of town. Don't go too near the

water, and be sure your rooms are dry and airy—that's the main point. We might move him early next week, I fancy ; if we get him up for an hour or two every day in the interval.'

Gilbert had kept Mrs. Branston very well informed as to John Saltram's progress, and that impetuous little woman had sent a ponderous retainer of the footman species to the Temple daily, laden now with hothouse grapes, and anon with dainty jellies, clear turtle-soups, or delicate preparations of chicken, blancmanges and iced drinks ; the conveyance whereof was a sore grievance to the ponderous domestic, in spite of all the aid to be derived from a liberal employment of cabs. Adela Branston had sent these things in defiance of her outraged kinswoman, Mrs. Pallinson, who was not slow to descant upon the impropriety of such a proceeding.

' I wonder you can talk in such a way, when you know how friendless this poor Mr. Saltram is, and how little trouble it costs me to do as much as this for him. But I daresay the good Samaritan had some one at home who objected to the waste of that twopence he paid for the poor traveller.'

Mrs. Pallinson gave a little shriek of horror on hearing this allusion, and protested against so profane a use of the gospel.

‘But the gospel was meant to be our guide in common things, wasn’t it, Mrs. Pallinson ? However, there’s not the least use in your being angry; for I mean to do what I can for Mr. Saltram, and there’s no one in the world could turn me from my intention.’

‘Indeed !’ cried the elder lady indignantly ; ‘and when he recovers you mean to marry him, I daresay. You will be weak enough to throw away your fortune upon a profligate and a spend-thrift, a man who is certain to make any woman miserable.’

And hereupon there arose what Sheridan calls ‘a very pretty quarrel’ between the two ladies, which went very near to end in Mrs. Pallinson’s total withdrawal from Cavendish-square. Very nearly, but not quite, to that agreeable consummation did matters proceed ; for, on the very verge of the final words which would have spoken the sentence of separation, Mrs. Pallinson was suddenly melted, and declared that nothing, no outrage of her feelings—‘and heaven knows how

they have been trodden on this day,' the injured matron added in parenthesis—should induce her to desert her dearest Adela. And so there was a hollow peace patched up, and Mrs. Branston felt that the blessings of freedom, the delightful relief of an escape from Pallinsonian influences, were not yet to be hers. Directly she heard from Gilbert that change of air had been ordered for the patient, she was eager to offer her villa near Maidenhead for his accommodation. 'The house is always kept in apple-pie order,' she wrote to Gilbert; 'and I can send down more servants to make everything comfortable for the invalid.'

'I know he is fond of the place,' she added in conclusion, after setting out all the merits of the villa with feminine minuteness; 'at least I know he used to like it, and I think it would please him to get well there. I can only say that it would make *me* very happy; so do arrange it, dear Mr. Fenton, if possible, and oblige yours ever faithfully,
ADELA BRANSTON.'

'Poor little woman,' murmured Gilbert, as he finished the letter. 'No; we will not impose upon her kindness; we will go somewhere else. Better for her that she should see and hear but

little of John Saltram for all time to come ; and then the foolish fancy will wear itself out perhaps, and she may live to be a happy wife yet ; unless she, too, is afflicted with the fatal capability of constancy. Is that such a common quality, I wonder ? are there many so luckless as to love once and once only, and who, setting all their hopes upon one cast, lose all if that be fatal ?'

Gilbert told John Saltram of Mrs. Branston's offer, which he was as prompt to decline as Gilbert himself had been.

' It is like her to wish it,' he said ; ' but, no, I should feel myself a double traitor and impostor under her roof. I have done her wrong enough already. If I could have loved her, Gilbert, all might have been well for you and me. God knows I tried to love her, poor little woman ; and she is just the kind of woman who might twine herself about any man's heart—graceful, pretty, gracious, tender, bright and intelligent enough for any man ; and not too clever. But *my* heart she never touched. From the hour I saw that *other*, I was lost. I will tell you all about that some day. No ; we will not go to the villa. Write and give Mrs. Branston my best thanks for the generous

offer, and invent some excuse for declining it ; that's a good fellow.'

By and by, when the letter was written, John Saltram said,

'I do not want to go out of town at all, Gilbert. It's no use for the doctor to talk ; I can't leave London till we have news of Marian.'

Gilbert had been prepared for this, and set himself to argue the point with admirable patience. Mr. Proul's work would go on just as well, he urged, whether they were in London or at Hampton. A telegram would bring them any tidings as quickly in the one place as the other. 'I am not asking you to go far, remember,' he added. ' You will be within an hour's journey of London, and the doctors declare this change is indispensable to your recovery. You have told us what a horror you have of these rooms.'

'Yes ; I doubt if any one but a sick man can understand his loathing of the scene of his illness. That room in there is filled with the shadows that haunted me in all those miserable nights—when the fever was at its worst, and I lived amidst a crowd of phantoms. Yes, I do most profoundly hate that room. As for this matter of change of

air, Gilbert, dispose of me as you please ; my worthless existence belongs to you.'

Gilbert was quick to take advantage of this concession. He went down to Hampton next day, and explored the neighbourhood on both sides of the Thames. His choice fell at last on a pretty little house within a stone's throw of the Palace gates, the back windows whereof looked out upon the now leafless solitude of Bushy Park, and where there was a comfortable-looking rosy-faced landlady, whose countenance was very pleasant to contemplate after the somewhat lachrymose visage of Mrs. Pratt. Here he found he could have all the accommodation he required, and hither he promised to bring the invalid early in the following week.

There were as yet no tidings worth speaking of from Mr. Proul. That distinguished member of the detective profession waited upon Gilbert Fenton with his budget twice a week, but the budget was a barren one. Mr. Proul's agent pronounced Mr. Medler's clerk the toughest individual it had ever been his lot to deal with. No amount of treating at the public-house round the corner—and the agent had ascended from the

primitive simplicity of a pint of porter to the highest flights in the art of compound liquors—could exert a softening influence upon that rigid nature. Either the clerk knew nothing about Percival Nowell, or had been so well schooled as to disclose nothing of what he knew. Money had been employed by the agent, as well as drink, as a means of temptation ; but even every insidious hint of possible gains had failed to move the ill-paid underling to any revelation.

‘It’s my belief the man knows nothing, or else I should have had it out of him by hook or by crook,’ Mr. Proul’s agent told him, and Mr. Proul repeated to his client.

This first agent having thus come to grief, and having perhaps made himself a suspected person in the eyes of the Meddler office by his manœuvres, a second spy had been placed to keep close watch upon the house, and to follow any person who at all corresponded with the detective idea of Mr. Nowell. It could be no more than an idea, unfortunately, since Gilbert had been able to give the accomplished Proul no description of the man he wanted to trace. Above all, the spy was to take special note of any lady who might be

seen to enter or leave the office, and to this end he was furnished with a close description of Marian.

Gilbert called upon Mrs. Branston before carrying John Saltram out of town ; he fancied that her offer of the Maidenhead villa would be better acknowledged personally than by a letter. He found the pretty little widow sorely disappointed by Mr. Saltram's refusal to occupy her house, and it was a little difficult to explain to her why they both preferred other quarters for the convalescent.

‘ Why will he not accept the smallest favour from me ? ’ Adela Branston asked plaintively. ‘ He ought to know that there is no *arrière pensée* in any offer which I make him—that I have no wish except for his welfare. Why does he not trust me a little more ? ’

‘ He will do so in future, I think, Mrs. Branston,’ Gilbert answered gravely. ‘ I fancy he has learned the folly and danger of all underhand policy, and that he will put more faith in his friends for the rest of his life.’

‘ And he is really much better, quite out of danger ? Do the doctors say that ? ’

‘ He is as much out of danger as a man can

well be whose strength has all been wasted in a perilous illness. He has that to regain yet, and the recovery will be slow work. Of course in his condition a relapse would be fatal; but there is no occasion to apprehend a relapse.'

'Thank heaven for that! And you will take care of him, Mr. Fenton, will you not?'

'I will do my very best. He saved my life once; so you see that I owe him a life.'

The invalid was conveyed to Hampton on a bright February day, when there was an agreeable glimpse of spring sunshine. He went down by road in a hired brougham, and the journey seemed a long one; but it was an unspeakable relief to John Saltram to see the suburban roads and green fields after the long imprisonment of the Temple,—a relief that moved him almost to tears in his extreme weakness.

'Could you believe that a man would be so childish, Gilbert?' he said apologetically. 'It might have been a good thing for me to have died in that dismal room, for heaven only knows what heavy sorrow lies before me in the future. Yet the sight of these common things touches me more keenly than all the glory of the Jungfrau touched

me ten years ago. What a gay bright-looking world it is ! And yet how many people are happy in it ? how many take the right road ? I suppose there is a right road by which we all might travel, if we only knew how to choose it.'

He felt the physical weariness of the journey acutely, but uttered no complaint throughout the way; though Gilbert could see the pale face growing paler, the sunken cheeks more pinched of aspect, as they went on. To the last he pronounced himself delighted by that quiet progress through the familiar landscape ; and then having reached his destination, had barely strength to totter to a comfortable chintz-covered sofa in the bright-looking parlour, where he fainted away. The professional nurse had been dismissed before they left London, and Gilbert was now the invalid's only attendant. The woman had performed her office tolerably well, after the manner of her kind ; but the presence of a sick nurse is not a cheering influence, and John Saltram was infinitely relieved by her disappearance.

' How good you are to me, Gilbert ! ' he said, that first evening of his sojourn at Hampton, after he had recovered from his faint, and was lying on

the sofa sipping a cup of tea. ‘ How good ! and yet you are my friend no longer ; all friendship is at an end between us. Well, God knows I am as helpless as that man who fell among thieves ; I cannot choose but accept your bounty.’

CHAPTER VI.

AN ILL-OMENED WEDDING.

AFTER that promise wrung from her by such a cruel agony, that fatal bond made between her and Stephen Whitelaw, Ellen Carley's life seemed to travel past her as if by some enchantment. Time lost its familiar sluggishness; the long industrious days, that had been so slow of old, flew by the bailiff's daughter like the shadows from a magic-lantern. At the first, after that desperate miserable day upon which the hateful words were uttered that were to bind her for life to a detested master, the girl had told herself that something *must* happen to prevent the carrying out of this abhorrent bargain. Something would happen. She had a vague faith that Providence would interfere somehow to save her. Day after day she looked into her father's face, thinking that from him, perhaps, might come some sign of wavering, some hint of possible release. Vain hope. The bailiff

having exacted the sacrifice, pretended to think his daughter's welfare secured by that very act. He did not hesitate to congratulate her on her good fortune, and to protest, with an accustomed oath, that there was not a sensible woman in England who would not envy her so excellent a match. Once poor Ellen, always impetuous and plain-spoken, lost all patience with him, and asked how he dared to say such things.

‘ You know that I hate this man, father ! ’ she cried passionately ; ‘ and that I hate myself for what I am going to do. You know that I have promised to be his wife for your sake, for your sake only ; and that if I could have saved you from disgrace by giving you my life, I should have done it gladly to escape this much greater sacrifice. Never speak to me about Stephen Whitelaw again, father, unless you want to drive me mad. Let me forget what sin I am going to commit, if I can ; let me go on blindfold.’

It was to be observed that from the hour of her betrothal Ellen Carley as far as possible avoided her father’s companionship. She worked more busily than ever about the big old house, was never tired of polishing the little-used furni-

ture and dusting the tenantless bed-chambers ; she seemed, indeed, to be infected with Mrs. Tadman's passion for superhuman cleanliness. To her dairy duties also she devoted much more time than of old ; anything to escape the parlour, where her father sat idle for a considerable portion of the day, smoking his pipe, and drinking rather more than was good for him. Nor did Mr. Carley, for his part, appear to dislike this tacit severance between his daughter and himself. As the foolish young woman chose to accept good fortune in a perverse spirit, it was well that they two should see as little of each other as possible. Every evening found Mr. Whitelaw a punctual visitor in the snug panelled parlour, and at such times the bailiff insisted upon his daughter's presence ; she was obliged to sit there night after night, stitching monotonously at some unknown calico garment—which might well, from the state of mind of the worker, have been her winding-sheet ; or darning one of an inexhaustible basket of woolen stockings belonging to her father. It was her irksome duty to be there, ready to receive any awkward compliment of her silent lover's, ready to acquiesce meekly in his talk of their approaching

wedding. But at all other times Mr. Carley was more than content with her absence.

At first the bailiff had made a feeble effort to reconcile his daughter to her position by the common bribe of fine clothes. He had extorted a sum of money from Stephen Whitelaw for this purpose, and had given that sum, or a considerable part of it, to his daughter, bidding her expend it upon her wedding finery. The girl took the money, and spent a few pounds upon the furbishing-up of her wardrobe, which was by no means an extensive one; but the remaining ten-pound note she laid by in a secret place, determined on no account to break in upon it.

‘The time may come when all my life will depend upon the possession of a few pounds,’ she said to herself; ‘when I may have some chance of setting myself free from that man.’

She had begun to contemplate such a possibility already, before her wedding-day. It was for her father’s sake she was going to sell her liberty, to take upon herself a bondage most odious to her. The time might come when her father would be beyond the reach of shame and

disgrace, when she might find some manner of escape from her slavery.

In the mean time the days hurried on, and Providence offered her no present means of rescue. The day of doom came nearer and nearer ; for the bailiff took part with his future son-in-law, and would hear of no reasons which Ellen could offer for delay. He was eager to squeeze the farmer's well-filled purse a little tighter, and he fancied that he might do this when his daughter was Stephen Whitelaw's wife. So suitor and father were alike pitiless, and the wedding was fixed for the 10th of March. There were no preparations to be made at Wyncomb Farmhouse. Mr. Whitelaw did not mean to waste so much as a five-pound note upon the embellishment of those barely-furnished rooms in honour of his bright young bride ; although Mrs. Tadman urged upon him the necessity of new muslin curtains here, and new dimity there, a coat or so of paint and whitewash in such and such rooms, and other small revivals of the same character ; not sorry to be able to remind him in this indirect manner that marriage was an expensive thing.

‘A young woman like that will expect to see

things bright and cheerful about her,' said Mrs. Tadman, in her most plausible tone, and rubbing her thin hands with an air of suppressed enjoyment. 'If you were going to marry a person of your own age, it would be different, of course; but young women have such extravagant notions. I could see Miss Carley did not think much of the furniture when I took her over the house on new-year's-day. She said the rooms looked gloomy, and that some of them gave her the horrors, and so on. If you don't have the place done up a bit at first, you'll have to get it done at last, depend upon it; a young wife like that will make the money spin, you may be sure.'

'Will she?' said Mr. Whitelaw, with a satisfied grin. 'That's my look-out. I don't think you've had very much chance of making my money spin, eh, Mrs. Tadman?'

The widow cast up her hands and eyes towards the ceiling of the parlour where they were sitting.

'Goodness knows I've had precious little chance of doing that, Stephen Whitelaw,' she replied.

'I should reckon not; and my wife will have about as much.'

There was some cold comfort in this. Mrs. Tadman had once hoped that if her cousin ever exalted any woman to the proud position of mistress of Wyncomb, she herself would be that favoured individual; and it was a hard thing to see a young person, who had nothing but a certain amount of good looks to recommend her, raised to that post of honour in her stead. It was some consolation, therefore, to discover that the interloper was to reign with very limited powers, and that none of the privileges or indulgences usually granted to youthful brides by elderly bridegrooms were to be hers. It was something, too, for Mrs. Tadman to be allowed to remain beneath the familiar shelter of that gloomy old house, and this boon had been granted to her at Ellen's express request.

‘I suppose she’s going to turn lazy as soon as she’s married, or she wouldn’t have wanted to keep you,’ the farmer said in rather a sulky manner, after he had given Mrs. Tadman his gracious permission to remain in his service. ‘But if she is, we must find some way of curing her of that. I don’t want a fine lady about *my* place. There’s the dairy, now; we might do more in that way, I

should think, and get more profit out of butter-making than we do by sending part of the milk up to London. Butter fetches a good price nowadays from year's end to year's end, and Ellen is a rare hand at a dairy ; I know that for certain.'

Thus did Mr. Whitelaw devote his pretty young wife to an endless prospect of butter-making. He had no intention that the alliance should be an unprofitable one, and he was already scheming how he might obtain some indirect kind of interest for that awful sum of two hundred pounds advanced to William Carley.

Sir David Forster had not come to make that threatened investigation of things at the Grange. Careless always in the management of his affairs, the receipt of a handsome sum of money from the bailiff had satisfied him, and he had suffered his suspicions to be lulled to rest for the time being, not caring to undertake the trouble of a journey to Hampshire, and an examination of dry business details.

It was very lucky for Mr. Carley that his employer was so easy and indolent a master ; for there were many small matters at the Grange which would have hardly borne inspection, and it

would have been difficult for Sir David to come there without making some discovery to his bailiff's disadvantage. The evil day had been warded off, however, by means of Stephen Whitelaw's money, and William Carley meant to act more cautiously, more honestly even, in future. He would keep clear of racecourses and gambling booths, he told himself, and of the kind of men who had beguiled him into dishonourable dealing.

‘I've had an uncommon narrow squeak of it,’ he muttered to himself occasionally, as he smoked a meditative pipe, ‘and have been as near seeing the inside of Portland prison as ever a man was. But it'll be a warning to me in future. And yet who could have thought things would have gone against me as they did? There was Sir Philip Christopher's bay colt Pigskin, for instance; that brute was bound to win.’

February came to an end; and when March once began, there seemed no pause or breathing-time for Ellen Carley till the 10th. And yet she had little business to occupy her during those bleak days of early spring. It was the horror of that rapid flight of time, which seemed independent of her own life in its hideous swiftness. Idle

or busy, it was all the same. The days would not linger for her; the dreaded 10th was close at hand.

Frank Randall was still in London, in that solicitor's office—a firm of some standing in the City—to which he had gone on leaving his father. He had written two or three times to Ellen since he left Hampshire, and she had answered his letters secretly; but pleasant though it was to her to hear from him, she begged him not to write, as her father's anger would be extreme if a letter should by any evil chance fall into his hands. So within the last few months there had been no tidings of Ellen's absent lover, and the girl was glad that it was so. What could she have said to him if she had been compelled to tell him of her engagement to Stephen Whitelaw? What excuse could she have made for marrying a man about whom she had been wont to express herself to Frank Randall in most unequivocal terms? Excuse there was none, since she could not betray her father. It was better, therefore, that young Randall should hear of her marriage in the common course of things, and that he should think of her just as badly as he pleased. This was only

one more poisoned drop in a cup that was all bitterness.

‘He will believe that I was a hypocrite at heart always,’ the unhappy girl said to herself, ‘and that I value Stephen Whitelaw’s money more than his true heart—that I can marry a man I despise and dislike for the sake of being rich. What can he think worse of me than that? and how can he help thinking that? He knows that I have a good spirit of my own, and that my father could not make me do anything against my will. He will never believe that this marriage has been all my father’s doing.’

The wedding morning came at last, bright and spring-like, with a sun that shone as gaily as if it had been lighting the happiest union that was ever recorded in the hymeneal register. There were the first rare primroses gleaming star-like amidst the early greenery of high grassy banks in solitary lanes about Crosber, and here and there the tender blue of a violet. It would have seemed a very fair morning upon which to begin the first page in the mystic volume of a new life, if Ellen Carley had been going to marry a man she loved; but no hapless condemned wretch who ever woke

to see the sun shining upon the day of his execution could have been more profoundly wretched than the bailiff's daughter, as she dressed herself mechanically in her one smart silk gown, and stood in a kind of waking trance before the quaint old-fashioned looking-glass which reflected her pale hopeless face. She had no girlish companion to assist in that dismal toilet. Long ago there had been promises exchanged between Ellen Carley and her chosen friend, the daughter of a miller who lived a little way on the other side of Crosber, to the effect that whichever was first to marry should call upon the other to perform the office of bridesmaid ; and Sarah Peters, the miller's daughter, was still single and eligible for the function. But there was to be no bridesmaid at this blighted wedding. Ellen had pleaded urgently that things might be arranged as quietly as possible ; and the master of Wyncomb, who hated spending money, and who apprehended that the expenses of any festivity would in all probability fall upon his own shoulders, was very well pleased to assent to this request of his betrothed.

‘ Quite right, Nell,’ he said ; ‘ we don’t want any foolish fuss, or a pack of people making them-

selves drunk at our expense. You and your father can come quietly to Crosber church, and Mrs. Tadman and me will meet you there, and the thing's done. The marriage wouldn't be any the tighter if we had a hundred people looking on, and the Bishop of Winchester to read the service.'

It was arranged in this manner, therefore ; and on that pleasant spring morning William Carley and his daughter walked to the quiet village where Gilbert Fenton had discovered the secret of Marian's retreat. The face under the bride's little straw bonnet was deadly pale, and the features had a rigid look that was new to them. The bailiff glanced at his daughter in a furtive way every now and then, with an uneasy sense of this strange look in her face. Even in his brute nature there were some faint twinges of compunction, now that the deed he had been so eager to compass was well-nigh done—some vague consciousness that he had been a hard and cruel father.

‘ And yet it's all for her own good,’ he told himself, ‘ quite as much as for mine. Better to marry a rich man than a pauper any day ; and to

take a dislike to a man's age or a man's looks is nothing but a girl's nonsense. The best husband is the one that can keep his wife best; and if I hadn't forced on this business, she'd have taken up with lawyer Randall's son, who's no better than a beggar, and a pretty life she'd have had of it with him.'

By such reasoning as this William Carley contrived to set his conscience at rest during that silent walk along the rustic lane between the Grange and Crosber church. It was not a conscience very difficult to appease. And as for his daughter's pallid looks, those of course were only natural to the occasion.

Mr. Whitelaw and Mrs. Tadman were at the church when the bailiff and his daughter arrived. The farmer had made a scarecrow of himself in a new suit of clothes, which he had ordered in honour of this important event, after a great deal of vacillation, and more than one countermand to the Malsham tailor who made the garments. At the last he was not quite clear in his mind as to whether he wanted the clothes, and the outlay was a serious one. Mrs. Tadman had need to hold his everyday coat up to the light to convince

him that the collar was threadbare, and that the sleeves shone as if purposely polished by some ingenious process.

‘Marriage is an expensive thing,’ she told him again, with a sigh; ‘and young girls expect to see a man dressed ever so smart on his wedding-day.’

‘I don’t care for her expectations,’ Mr. Whitelaw muttered, in reply to this remark; ‘and if I don’t want the clothes, I won’t have ’em. Do you think I could get over next Christmas with them as I’ve got?’

Mrs. Tadman said ‘No’ in a most decisive manner. Perhaps she derived a malicious pleasure from the infliction of that tailor’s bill upon her cousin Whitelaw. So the new suit had been finally ordered; and Stephen stood arrayed therein before the altar-rails in the gray old church at Crosber, a far more grotesque and outrageous figure to contemplate than any knight templar, or bearded cavalier of the days of the first English James, whose effigies were to be seen in the chancel. Mrs. Tadman stood a little way behind him, in a merino gown, and a new bonnet extorted somehow from the reluctant Stephen. She

was full of smiles and cordial greetings for the bride, who did not even see her. Neither did Ellen Carley see the awkward figure of her bridegroom. A mist was before her eyes, as if there had been an atmosphere of summer blight or fog in the village church. She knelt, or rose, as her prayer-book taught her, and went through the solemn service as placidly as if she had been a wondrous piece of mechanism constructed to perform such movements ; and then, like a creature in a dream, she found herself walking out of the church presently, with her hand on Stephen Whitelaw's arm. She had a faint consciousness of some ceremony in the vestry, where it had taken Stephen a long time to sign his name in the register, and where the clergyman had congratulated him upon his good fortune in having won for himself such a pretty young wife ; but it was all more or less like a dreadful oppressive dream. Mr. Whitelaw's chaise-cart was waiting for them ; and they all four got in, and drove at once to Wyncomb ; where there was another ponderous dinner, very much like the banquet of new-year's-day, and where the bailiff drank freely, after his wont, and grew somewhat uproarious

towards tea-time, though Mr. Whitelaw's selections of port and sherry were not of a kind to tempt a connoisseur.

There was to be no honeymoon trip. Stephen Whitelaw did not understand the philosophy of running away from a comfortable home to spend money in furnished lodgings ; and he had said as much, when the officious Tadman suggested a run to Weymouth, or Bournemouth, or a fortnight in the Isle of Wight. To Ellen it was all the same where the rest of her life should be spent. It could not be otherwise than wretched henceforward, and the scene of her misery mattered nothing. So she uttered no complaint because her husband brought her straight home to Wyncomb Farmhouse, and her wedded life began in that dreary dwelling-place.

CHAPTER VII.

A DOMESTIC MYSTERY.

IT was near the end of March, but still bleak cold weather. Ellen Carley had been married something less than a fortnight, and had come to look upon the dismal old farmhouse by the river with a more accustomed eye than when Mrs. Tadman had taken her from room to room on a journey of inspection. Not that the place seemed any less dreary and ugly to her to-day than it had seemed at the very first. Familiarity could not make it pleasant. She hated the house and everything about and around it, as she hated her husband, with a rooted aversion, not to be subdued by any endeavour which she might make now and then—and she did honestly make such endeavour—to arrive at a more Christian-like frame of mind.

Notwithstanding this deeply-seated instinctive dislike to all her surroundings, she endured her fate quietly, and did her duty with a patient spirit

which might fairly be accepted as an atonement for those inward rebellious feelings which she could not conquer. Having submitted to be the scapegoat of her father's sin, she bore her burden very calmly, and fulfilled the sacrifice without any outward mark of martyrdom.

She went about the work of the farmhouse with a resolute active air that puzzled Mrs. Tadman, who had fully expected the young wife would play the fine lady, and leave all the drudgery of the household to her. But it really seemed as if Ellen liked hard work. She went from one task to another with an indefatigable industry, an energy that never gave way. Only when the day's work in house and dairy was done did her depression of spirits become visible. Then, indeed, when all was finished, and she sat down, neatly dressed for the afternoon, in the parlour with Mrs. Tadman, it was easy to see how utterly hopeless and miserable this young wife was. The pale fixed face, the listless hands clasped loosely in her lap, every attitude of the drooping figure betrayed the joyless spirit, the broken heart. At these times, when they were alone together, waiting Stephen Whitelaw's coming home to tea, Mrs.

Tadman's heart, not entirely hardened by long years of self-seeking, yearned towards her kinsman's wife ; and the secret animosity with which she had at first regarded her changed to a silent pity, a compassion she would fain have expressed in some form or other, had she dared.

But she could not venture to do this. There was something in the girl, a quiet air of pride and self-reliance, in spite of her too evident sadness, which forbade any overt expression of sympathy ; so Mrs. Tadman could only show her friendly feelings in a very small way, by being especially active and brisk in assisting all the household labours of the new mistress of Wyncomb, and by endeavouring to cheer her with such petty gossip as she was able to pick up. Ellen felt that the woman was kindly disposed towards her, and she was not ungrateful ; but her heart was quite shut against sympathy, her sorrow was too profound to be lightened ever so little by human friendship. It was a dull despair, a settled conviction that for her life could never have again a single charm, that her days must go on in their slow progress to the grave unlightened by one ray of sunshine, her burden carried to the end

of the dreary journey unrelieved by one hour of respite. It seemed very hard for one so young, not quite three-and-twenty yet, to turn her back upon every hope of happiness, to be obliged to say to herself, 'For me the sun can never shine again, the world I live in can never more seem beautiful, or beautiful only in bitter contrast to my broken heart.' But Ellen told herself that this fate was hers, and that she must needs face it with a resolute spirit.

The household work employed her mind in some measure, and kept her, more or less, from thinking; and it was for this reason she worked with such unflinching industry, just as she had worked in the last month or two at the Grange, trying to shut her eyes to that hateful future which lay so close before her. Mr. Whitelaw had no reason to retract what he had said in his pride of heart about Ellen Carley's proficiency in the dairy. She proved herself all that he had boasted, and the dairy flourished under the new management. There was more butter, and butter of a superior quality, sent to market than under the reign of Mrs. Tadman; and the master of Wyncomb made haste to increase his stock of milch

cows, in order to make more money by this branch of his business. To have won for himself a pretty young wife, who, instead of squandering his substance, would help him to grow richer, was indeed a triumph, upon which Mr. Whitelaw congratulated himself with many a suppressed chuckle as he went about his daily labours, or jogged slowly home from market in his chaise-cart.

As to his wife's feelings towards himself, whether those were cold indifference or hidden dislike, that was an abstruse and remote question which Mr. Whitelaw never took the trouble to ask himself. She was his wife. He had won her, that was the grand point; whatever disinclination she might have felt for the alliance, whatever love she might have cherished for another, had been trampled down and subjugated, and he, Stephen Whitelaw, had obtained the desire of his heart. He had won her, against that penniless young jackanapes, lawyer Randall's son, who had treated him with marked contempt on more than one occasion when they happened to come across each other in Malsham Corn-exchange, which was held in the great covered quadrangular courtyard of the chief

inn at Malsham, and was a popular lounge for the inhabitants of that town. He had won her ; her own sentiments upon the subject of this marriage were of very little consequence. He had never expected to be loved by his wife, his own ideas of that passion called love being of the vaguest ; but he meant to be obeyed by her. She had begun well, had taken her new duties upon herself in a manner that gladdened his sordid soul ; and although they had been married nearly a fortnight, she had given no hint of a desire to know the extent of his wealth, or where he kept any little hoard of ready money that he might have by him in the house. Nor on market-day had she expressed any wish to go with him to Malsham to spend money on drapery ; and he had an idea, sedulously cultivated by Mrs. Tadman, that young women were perpetually wanting to spend money at drapers' shops. Altogether, that first fortnight of his married life had been most satisfactory, and Mr. Whitelaw was inclined to regard matrimony as a wise and profitable institution.

The day's work was done, and Ellen was sitting with Mrs. Tadman in the every-day parlour,

waiting for the return of her lord and master from Malsham. It was not a market-day, but Stephen Whitelaw had announced at dinner-time that he had an appointment at Malsham, and had set out immediately after dinner in the chaise-cart, much to the wonderment of Mrs. Tadman, who was an inveterate gossip, and never easy until she arrived at the bottom of any small household mystery. She wondered not a little also at Ellen's supreme indifference to her husband's proceedings.

'I can't for the life of me think what's taken him to Malsham to-day,' she said, as she plied her rapid knitting-needles in the manufacture of a gray-worsted stocking. 'I haven't known him go to Malsham, except of a market-day, not once in a twelvemonth. It must be a rare business to take him there in the middle of the week; for he can't abide to leave the farm in working-hours, except when he's right down obliged to it. Nothing goes on the same when his back's turned, he says; there's always something wrong. And if it was an appointment with any one belonging to Malsham, why couldn't it have stood over till Saturday? It must be some-

thing out of the common that won't keep a couple of days.'

Mrs. Tadman went on with her knitting, gazing at Ellen with an expectant countenance, waiting for her to make some suggestion. But the girl was quite silent, and there was a blank expression in her eyes, which looked out across the level stretch of grass between the house and the river, a look that told Mrs. Tadman very few of her words had been heard by her companion. It was quite disheartening to talk to such a person; but the widow went on nevertheless, being so full of her subject that she must needs talk to some one, even if that some one were little better than a stock or a stone.

'There was a letter that came for Stephen before dinner to-day; he got it when he came in, but it was lying here for an hour first. Perhaps it was that as took him to Malsham; and yet that's strange, for it was a London letter—and it don't seem likely as any one could be coming down from London to meet Steph at Malsham. I can't make top nor tail of it.'

Mrs. Tadman laid down her knitting, and gave the fire a vigorous stir. She wanted some

vent for her vexation ; for it was really too provoking to see Ellen Whitelaw sitting staring out of the window like a lifeless statue, and not taking the faintest interest in the mystery of her husband's conduct. She stirred the fire, and then busied herself with the tea-table, giving a touch here and there where no re-arrangement was wanted, for the sake of doing something.

The room looked comfortable enough in the cold light of the spring afternoon. It was the most occupied room in the house, and the least gloomy. The glow of a good fire brightened the scanty shabby furniture a little, and the table, with its white cloth, homely flowered cups and saucers, bright metal teapot, and substantial fare in the way of ham and home-made bread, had a pleasant look enough in the eyes of any one coming in from a journey through the chill March atmosphere. Mr. Whitelaw's notion of tea was a solid meal, which left him independent of the chances of supper, and yet open to do something in that way ; in case any light kickshaw, such as liver and bacon, a boiled sheep's head, or a beef-steak pie, should present itself to his notice.

Ellen roused herself from her long reverie at

last. There was the sound of wheels upon the cart-track across the wide open field in front of the house.

‘Here comes Mr. Whitelaw,’ she said, looking out into the gathering dusk; ‘and there’s some one with him.’

‘Some one with him!’ cried Mrs. Tadman. ‘Why, my goodness, who can that be?’

She ran to the window and peered eagerly out. The cart had driven up to the door by this time, and Mr. Whitelaw and his companion were alighting. The stranger was rather a handsome man, Mrs. Tadman saw at the first glance, tall and broad-shouldered, clad in dark-gray trousers, a short pilot-coat, and a wide-awake hat; but with a certain style even in this rough apparel which was not the style of agricultural Malsham, an unmistakable air that belongs to a dweller in great cities.

‘I never set eyes upon him before,’ exclaimed Mrs. Tadman, aghast with wonder; for visitors at Wyncomb were of the rarest, and an unknown visitor above all things marvellous.

Mr. Whitelaw opened the house-door, which opened straight into a little lobby between the

two parlours. There was a larger door and a spacious stone entrance-hall at one end of the house ; but that door had not been opened within the memory of man, and the hall was only used as a storehouse nowadays. There was some little mumbling talk in the lobby before the two men came in, and then Mrs. Tadman's curiosity was relieved by a closer view of the stranger.

Yes, he was certainly handsome, remarkably handsome even, for a man whose youth was past ; but there was something in his face, a something sinister and secret, as it were, which did not strike Mrs. Tadman favourably. She could not by any means have explained the nature of her sensations on looking at him, but, as she said afterwards, she felt all in a moment that he was there for no good. And yet he was very civil-spoken too, and addressed both the ladies in a most conciliating tone, and with a kind of florid politeness.

Ellen looked at him, interested for the moment in spite of her apathetic indifference to all things. The advent of a stranger was something so rare as to awaken a faint interest in the mind most dead to impressions. She did not like his manner ; there was something false and hollow in his

extreme politeness. And his face—what was it in his face that startled her with such a sudden sense of strangeness and yet of familiarity ?

Had she ever seen him before ? Yes ; surely that was the impression which sent such a sudden shock through her nerves, which startled her from her indifference into eager wonder and perplexity. Where had she seen him before ? Where and when ? Long ago, or only very lately ? She could not tell. Yet it seemed to her that she had looked at eyes like those, not once, but many times in her life. And yet the man was utterly strange to her. That she could have seen him before appeared impossible. It must have been some one like him she had seen, then. Yes, that was it. It was the shadow of another face in his that had startled her with so strange a feeling, almost as if she had been looking upon some ghostly thing. Another face, like and yet unlike.

But what face ? whose face ?

She could not answer that question, and her inability to solve the enigma tormented her all tea-time, as the stranger sat opposite to her, making a pretence of eating heartily, in accordance with Mr. Whitelaw's hospitable invitation, while

that gentleman himself ploughed away with a steady persistence that made awful havoc with the ham, and reduced the loaf in a manner suggestive of *Jack the Giant-killer*.

The visitor presently ventured to remark that tea-drinking was not much in his way, and that, if it were all the same to Mr. Whitelaw, he should prefer a glass of brandy-and-water; whereupon the brandy-bottle was produced from a cupboard by the fireplace, of which Stephen himself kept the key, judiciously on his guard against a possible taste for ardent spirits developing itself in Mrs. Tadman.

After this the stranger sat for some time, drinking cold brandy-and-water, and staring moodily at the fire, without making the faintest attempt at conversation, while Mr. Whitelaw finished his tea, and the table was cleared; and even after this, when the farmer had taken his place upon the opposite side of the hearth, and seemed to be waiting for his guest to begin business.

He was not a lively stranger; he seemed, indeed, to have something on his mind, to be brooding upon some trouble or difficulty, as Mrs. Tad-

man remarked to her kinsman's wife afterwards. Both the women watched him: Ellen always perplexed by that unknown likeness, which seemed sometimes to grow stronger, sometimes to fade away altogether, as she looked at him; Mrs. Tadman in a rabid state of curiosity, so profound was the mystery of his silent presence.

What was he there for? What could Stephen want with him? He was not one of Stephen's sort, by any means; had no appearance of association with agricultural interests. And yet there he was, a silent inexplicable presence, a mysterious figure with a moody brow, which seemed to grow darker as Mrs. Tadman watched him.

At last, about an hour after the tea-table had been cleared, he rose suddenly, with an abrupt gesture, and said,

‘Come, Whitelaw, if you mean to show me this house of yours, you may as well show it to me at once.’

His voice had a harsh unpleasant sound as he said this. He stood with his back to the women, staring at the fire, while Stephen Whitelaw lighted a candle in his slow dawdling way.

‘Be quick, man alive,’ the stranger cried im-

patiently, turning sharply round upon the farmer, who was trimming an incorrigible wick with a pair of blunted snuffers. ‘Remember, I’ve got to go back to Malsham; I haven’t all the night to waste.’

‘I don’t want to set my house afire,’ Mr. Whitelaw answered sullenly; ‘though, perhaps, *you* might like that. It might suit your book, you see.’

The stranger gave a sudden shudder, and told the farmer with an angry oath to ‘drop that sort of insolence.’

‘And now show the way, and look sharp about it,’ he said in an authoritative tone.

They went out of the room in the next moment. Mrs. Tadman gazed after them, or rather at the door which had closed upon them, with a solemn awe-stricken stare.

‘I don’t like the look of it, Ellen,’ she said; ‘I don’t at all like the look of it.’

‘What do you mean?’ the girl asked indifferently.

‘I don’t like the hold that man has got over Stephen, nor the way he speaks to him—almost as if Steph was a dog. Did you hear him just now? And what does he want to see the house

for, I should like to know? What can this house matter to him, unless he was going to buy it? That's it, perhaps, Ellen. Stephen has been speculating, and has gone and ruined himself, and that strange man is going to buy Wyncomb. He gave me a kind of turn the minute I looked at him. And, depend upon it, he's come to turn us all out of house and home.'

Ellen gave a faint shudder. What if her father's wicked scheming were to come to such an end as this! what if she had been sold into bondage, and the master to whom she had been given had not even the wealth which had been held before her as a bait in her misery! For herself she cared little whether she were rich or poor. It could make but a difference of detail in the fact of her unhappiness, whether she were mistress of Wyncomb or a homeless tramp upon the country roads. The workhouse without Stephen Whitelaw must needs be infinitely preferable to Wyncomb Farm with him. And for her father, it seemed only a natural and justifiable thing that his guilt and his greed should be so punished. He had sold his daughter into lifelong slavery for nothing but that one advance of two hundred pounds. He had

saved himself from the penalty of his dishonesty, however, by that sacrifice ; and would, no doubt, hold his daughter's misery lightly enough, even if poverty were added to the wretchedness of her position.

The two women sat down on opposite sides of the hearth ; Mrs. Tadman, too anxious to go on with her accustomed knitting, only able to wring her hands in a feeble way, and groan every now and then, or from time to time burst into some fragmentary speech.

‘ And Stephen’s just the man to have such a thing on his mind and keep it from everybody till the last moment,’ she cried piteously. ‘ And so many speculations as there are nowadays to tempt a man to his ruin—railways and mines, and loans to Turks and Red Indians and suchlike foreigners ; and Steph might so easy be tempted by the hope of larger profits than he can make by farming.’

‘ But it’s no use torturing yourself like that with fears that may be quite groundless,’ Ellen said at last, rousing herself a little in order to put a stop to the wailing and lamentations of her companion. ‘ There’s no use in anticipating trouble. There may be nothing in this business after all.

Mr. Whitelaw may have a fancy for showing people his house. He wanted me to see it, if you remember, that new-year's afternoon.'

'Yes; but that was different. He meant to marry you. Why should he want to show the place to a stranger? I can't believe but what that strange man is here for something, and something bad. I saw it in his face when he first came in.'

It was useless arguing the matter; Mrs. Tadman was evidently not to be shaken; so Ellen said no more; and they sat on in silence, each occupied with her own thoughts.

Ellen's were not about Stephen Whitelaw's financial condition, but they were very sad ones. She had received a letter from Frank Randall since her marriage; a most bitter letter, upbraiding her for her falsehood and desertion, and accusing her of being actuated by mercenary motives in her marriage with Stephen Whitelaw.

'How often have I heard you express your detestation of that fellow!' the young man wrote indignantly. 'How often have I heard you declare that no earthly persuasion should ever induce you to marry him! And yet before my back

has been turned six months, I hear that you are his wife. Without a word of warning, without a line of explanation to soften the blow—if anything could soften it—the news comes to me, from a stranger who knew nothing of my love for you. It is very hard, Ellen ; all the harder because I had so fully trusted in your fidelity.

‘I will own that the prospect I had to offer you was a poor one ; involving long delay before I could give you such a home as I wanted to give you ; but O, Nelly, Nelly, I felt so sure that you would be true to me ! And if you found yourself in any difficulty, worried beyond your power of resistance by your father—though I did not think you were the kind of girl to yield weakly to persuasion—a line from you would have brought me to your side, ready to defend you from any persecution, and only too proud to claim you for my wife, and carry you away from your father’s unkindness.’

The letter went on for some time in the same upbraiding strain. Ellen shed many bitter tears over it in the quiet of her own room. It had been delivered to her secretly by her old friend Sarah Peters, the miller’s daughter, who had been the

confidante of her love-affairs ; for even in his indignation Mr. Randall had been prudent enough to consider that such a missive, falling perchance into Stephen Whitelaw's hands, might work serious mischief.

Cruel as the letter was, Ellen could not leave it quite unanswered ; some word in her own defence she must needs write ; but her reply was of the briefest.

‘ There are some things that can never be explained,’ she wrote, ‘ and my marriage is one of those. No one could save me from it, you least of all. There was no help for me ; and I believe, with all my heart, that, in acting as I did, I only did my duty. I had not the courage to write to you beforehand to tell you what was going to be. I thought it was almost better you should hear it from a stranger. The more hardly you think of me, the easier it will be for you to forget me. There is some comfort in that. I daresay it will be very easy for you to forget. But if, in days to come, when you are happily married to some one else, you can teach yourself to think more kindly of me, and to believe that in what I did I acted for the best, you will be performing an

act of charity towards a poor unhappy girl, who has very little left to hope for in this world.'

It was a hard thing for Ellen to think that, in the estimation of the man she loved, she must for ever seem the basest and most mercenary of womankind ; and yet how poor an excuse could she offer in the vague pleading of her letter ! She could not so much as hint at the truth ; she could not blacken her father's character. That Frank Randall should despise her, only made her trial a little sharper, her daily burden a little heavier, she told herself.

With her mind full of these thoughts, she had very little sympathy to bestow upon Mrs. Tadman, whose fragmentary lamentations only worried her, like the murmurs of some troublesome not-to-be-pacified child ; whereby that doleful person, finding her soul growing heavier and heavier, for lack of counsel or consolation, could at last endure this state of suspense no longer in sheer inactivity, but was fain to bestir herself somehow, if even in the most useless manner. She got up from her seat therefore, went over to the door, and, softly opening it, peered out into the darkness beyond.

There was nothing, no glimmer of Stephen's

candle, no sound of men's footsteps or of men's voices ; the merest blankness, and no more. The two men had been away from the parlour something more than half an hour by this time.

For about five minutes Mrs. Tadman stood at the open door, peering out and listening, and still without result. Then, with a shrill sudden sound through the long empty passages, there came a shriek, a prolonged piercing cry of terror or of pain, which turned Mrs. Tadman's blood to ice, and brought Ellen to her side, pale and breathless.

‘ What was that ? ’

‘ What was that ? ’

Both uttered the same question simultaneously, looking at each other aghast, and then both fled in the direction from which that shrill cry had come.

A woman's voice surely ; no masculine cry ever sounded with such piercing treble.

They hurried off to discover the meaning of this startling sound, but were neither of them very clear as to whence it had come. From the upper story no doubt, but in that rambling habitation there was so much scope for uncertainty. They ran together, up the staircase most used, to the corridor from which the principal rooms opened.

Before they could reach the top of the stairs, they heard a scuffling hurrying sound of heavy footsteps on the floor above them, and on the landing met Mr. Whitelaw and his unknown friend, face to face.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked the farmer sharply, looking angrily at the two scared faces.

‘That’s just what we want to know,’ his wife answered. ‘Who was it that screamed just now? Who’s been hurt?’

‘My friend stumbled against a step in the passage yonder, and knocked his shin. He cried out a bit louder than he need have done, if that’s what you mean, but not loud enough to cause all this fuss. Get downstairs again, you two, and keep quiet. I’ve no patience with such nonsense; coming flying upstairs as if you’d both gone mad.’

‘It was not your friend’s voice we heard,’ Ellen answered resolutely; ‘it was a woman’s cry. You must have heard it surely, Stephen Whitelaw.’

‘I heard nothing but what I tell you,’ the farmer muttered sulkily. ‘Get downstairs, can’t you?’

‘Not till I know what’s the matter,’ his wife said, undismayed by his anger. ‘Give me your light, and let me go and see.’

‘You can go where you like, wench, and see what you can; and an uncommon deal wiser you’ll be for your trouble.’

And yet, although Mr. Whitelaw gave his wife the candlestick with an air of profound indifference, there was an uneasy look in his countenance which she could plainly see, and which perplexed her not a little.

‘Come, Mrs. Tadman,’ she said decisively, ‘we had better see into this. It was a woman’s voice, and must have been one of the girls, I suppose. It may be nothing serious, after all,—these country girls scream out for a very little,—but we’d better get to the bottom of it.’

Mr. Whitelaw burst into a laugh—and he was a man whose laughter was as unpleasant as it was rare.

‘Ay, my wench, you’d best get to the bottom of it,’ he said, ‘since you’re so uncommon clever. Me and my friend will go back to the parlour, and take a glass of grog.’

The gentleman whom Mr. Whitelaw honoured

with his friendship had stood a little way apart all this time, wiping his forehead with a big orange-coloured silk handkerchief. That blow upon his shin must have been rather a sharp one, if it had brought that cold sweat out upon his ashen face.

‘Yes,’ he muttered; ‘come along, can’t you? don’t stand jawing here all night;’ and hurried downstairs before his host.

It had been all the business of a couple of minutes. Ellen Whitelaw and Mrs. Tadman went down to the ground-floor by another staircase leading directly to the kitchen. The room looked comfortable enough, and the two servant-girls were sitting at a table near the fire. One was a strapping rosy-cheeked country girl, who did all the household work; the other an overgrown clumsy-looking girl, hired straight from the workhouse by Mr. Whitelaw, from economical motives; a stolid-looking girl, whose intellect was of the lowest order; a mere zoophyte girl, one would say—something between the vegetable and animal creation.

This one, whose name was Sarah Batts, was chiefly employed in the poultry-yard and dairy. She had a broad brawny hand, which was useful

for the milking of cows, and showed some kind of intelligence in the management of young chickens and the treatment of refractory hens.

Martha Holden, the house-servant, was busy making herself a cap as her mistress came into the kitchen, droning some Hampshire ballad by way of accompaniment to her work. Sarah Batts was seated in an attitude of luxurious repose, with her arms folded, and her feet on the fender.

‘Was it either of you girls that screamed just now?’ Ellen asked anxiously.

‘Screamed, ma’am! no, indeed,’ Martha Holden answered, with an air of perfect good faith. ‘What should we scream for? I’ve been sitting here at my work for the last hour, as quiet as could be.’

‘And, Sarah,—was it you, Sarah? For goodness’ sake tell the truth.’

‘Me, mum! lor no, mum. I was up with master showing him and the strange gentleman a light.’

‘You were upstairs with your master? And did you hear nothing? A piercing shriek that rang through the house;—you must surely have heard it, both of you.’

Martha shook her head resolutely.

‘Not me, mum ; I didn’t hear a sound. The kitchen-door was shut all the time Sarah was away, and I was busy at work, and thinking of nothing but my work. I wasn’t upon the listen, as you may say.’

The kitchen was at the extreme end of the house, remote from that direction whence the unexplainable cry seemed to have come.

‘It is most extraordinary,’ Ellen said gravely, perplexed beyond all measure. ‘But you, Sarah ; if you were upstairs with your master, you must surely have heard that shriek ; it seemed to come from upstairs.’

‘Did master hear it ?’ asked the girl deliberately.

‘He says not.’

‘Then how should I, mum ? No, mum, I didn’t hear nothink ; I can take my Bible oath of that.’

‘I don’t want any oaths ; I only want to know the meaning of this business. There would have been no harm in your screaming. You might just as well speak the truth about it.’

‘Lor, mum, but it warn’t me,’ answered Sarah

Batts with an injured look. ‘What ever could go to put it in your head as it was me?’

‘It must have been one or other of you two girls. There’s no other woman in the house ; and as you were upstairs, it seems more likely to have been you. However, there’s no use talking any more about it. Only we both heard the scream, didn’t we, Mrs. Tadman ?’

‘I should think we did, indeed,’ responded the widow with a vehement shudder. ‘My flesh is all upon the creep at this very moment. I don’t think I ever had such a turn in my life.’

They went back to the parlour, leaving the two servants still sitting by the fire ; Sarah Batts with that look of injured innocence fixed upon her wooden countenance, Martha Holden cheerfully employed in the construction of her Sunday cap. In the parlour the two men were both standing by the table, the stranger with his back to the women as they entered, Stephen Whitelaw facing him. The former seemed to have been counting something, but stopped abruptly as the women came into the room.

There was a little heap of bank-notes lying on the table. Stephen snatched them up hastily,

and thrust them in a bundle into his waistcoat-pocket; while the stranger put a strap round a bulky red-morocco pocket-book with a more deliberate air, as of one who had nothing to hide from the world.

That guilty furtive air of Stephen's, and, above all, that passage of money between the two men, confirmed Mrs. Tadman in her notion that Wyncomb Farm was going to change hands. She resumed her seat by the fire with a groan, and accepted Ellen's offer of a glass of spirits-and-water with a doleful shake of her head.

' Didn't I tell you so ? ' she whispered, as Mrs. Whitelaw handed her the comforting beverage.

The stranger was evidently on the point of departure. There was a sound of wheels on the gravel outside the parlour window—the familiar sound of Stephen Whitelaw's chaise-cart; and that gentleman was busy helping his visitor on with his greatcoat.

' I shall be late for the last train,' said the stranger, ' unless your man drives like the very devil.'

' He'll drive fast enough, I daresay, if you give him half-a-crown,' Mr. Whitelaw answered

with a grin ; ‘ but don’t let him go and do my horse any damage, or you’ll have to pay for it.’

‘ Of course. You’d like to get the price of a decent animal out of me for that broken-kneed hard-mouthed brute of yours,’ replied the stranger with a scornful laugh. ‘ I think there never was such a money-grubbing, grinding, grasping beggar since the world began. However, you’ve seen the last shilling you’re ever likely to get out of me ; so make the best of it ; and remember, wherever *I* may be, there are friends of mine in this country who will keep a sharp look-out upon you, and let me know precious quick if you don’t stick to your part of our bargain like an honest man, or as nearly like one as nature will allow you to come. And now good-night, Mr. Whitelaw.—Ladies, your humble servant.’

He was gone before Ellen or Mrs. Tadman could reply to his parting salutation, had they been disposed to do so. Mr. Whitelaw went out with him, and gave some final directions to the stable-lad who was to drive the chaise-cart, and presently came back to the parlour, looking considerably relieved by his guest’s departure.

Mrs. Tadman rushed at once to the expression of her fears.

‘ Stephen Whitelaw,’ she exclaimed solemnly, ‘ tell us the worst at once. It’s no good keeping things back from us. That man has come here to turn us out of house and home. You’ve sold Wyncomb.’

‘ Sold Wyncomb ! Have you gone crazy, you old fool ?’ cried Mr. Whitelaw, contemplating his kinswoman with a most evil expression of countenance. ‘ What’s put that stuff in your head ?’

‘ Your own doings, Stephen, and that man’s. What does he come here for, with his masterful ways, unless it’s to turn us out of house and home ? What did you show him the house for ? Nigh upon an hour you were out of this room with him, if you were a minute. Why did money pass from him to you ? I saw you put it in your pocket—a bundle of bank-notes.’

‘ You’re a prying old catemeran !’ cried Mr. Whitelaw savagely, ‘ and a drunken old fool into the bargain.—Why do you let her muddle herself with the gin-bottle like that, Ellen ? You ought to have more respect for my property. You don’t call that taking care of your husband’s house.—

As for you, mother Tadman, if you treat me to any more of this nonsense, you will find yourself turned out of house and home a precious deal sooner than you bargained for ; but it won't be because of my selling Wyncomb. Sell Wyncomb, indeed ! I've about as much thought of going up in a balloon, as of parting with a rood or a perch of my father's land.'

This was a very long speech for Mr. Whitelaw ; and, having finished it, he sank into his chair, quite exhausted by the unusual effort, and refreshed himself with copious libations of gin-and-water.

' What was that man here for, then, Stephen ? It's only natural I should want to know that,' said Mrs. Tadman, abashed but not struck dumb by her kinsman's reproof.

' What's that to you ? Business. Yes, there *has* been money pass between us, and it's rather a profitable business for me. Perhaps it was horse-racing ; perhaps it wasn't. That's about all you've any call to know. I've made money by it, and not lost. And now, don't let me be bothered about it any more, if you and me are to keep friends.'

‘I’m sure, Stephen,’ Mrs. Tadman remonstrated in a feebly plaintive tone, ‘I’ve no wish to bother you ; there’s nothing farther from my thoughts ; but it’s only natural that I should be anxious about a place where I’ve lived so many years. Not but what I could get my living easy enough elsewhere, as you must know, Stephen, being able to turn my hand to almost anything.’

To this feeble protest Mr. Whitelaw vouchsafed no answer. He had lighted his pipe by this time, and was smoking and staring at the fire with his usual stolid air—meditative, it might be, or only ruminant, like one of his own cattle.

But all through that night Mr. Whitelaw, who was not commonly a seer of visions or dreamer of dreams, had his slumbers disturbed by some unwonted perplexity of spirit. His wife lay broad awake, thinking of that prolonged and piercing cry, which seemed to her, the more she meditated upon it, to have been a cry of anguish or of terror, and could not fail to notice this unusual disturbance of her husband’s sleep. More than once he muttered to himself in a troubled manner ; but his words, for the most part, were incoherent and

disjointed—words of which that perplexed listener could make nothing.

Once she heard him say, 'A bad job—dangerous business.'

CHAPTER VIII.

IN PURSUIT.

JOHN SALTRAM improved daily at Hampton Court. In spite of his fierce impatience to get well, in order to engage in the search for Marian—an impatience which was in itself sufficient to militate against his well-being—he did make considerable progress on the road to recovery. He was still very weak, and it must take time to complete his restoration; but he was no longer the pale ghost of his former self that Gilbert had brought down to the quiet suburb.

It would have been a cruel thing to leave him much alone at such a time, or it would have seemed very cruel to Gilbert Fenton, who had ever present in his memory those old days in Egypt when this man had stood him in such good stead. He remembered the days of his own sickness, and contrived to perform his business duties within the smallest time possible, and so

spend the rest of his life in the comfortable sitting-rooms looking out upon Bushy-park on the one side, and on the other upon the pretty high road before the Palace grounds.

Nor was there any sign in the intercourse of those two that the bond of friendship between them was broken. There was, it is true, a something deprecating in John Saltram's manner that had not been common to him of old, and in Gilbert Fenton a deeper gravity than was quite natural; but that was all. It was difficult to believe that any latent spirit of animosity could lurk in the mind of either. In sober truth, Gilbert, in his heart of hearts, had forgiven his treacherous friend. Again and again he had told himself that the wrong he had suffered was an unpardonable offence, a thing not to be forgiven upon any ground whatever. But, lo, when he looked into his mind to discover the smouldering fires of that burning anger which he had felt at first against the traitor, he could find nothing but the gray ashes of a long-expired flame. The wrong had been suffered, and he loved his old friend still. Yes, there was that in his heart for John Saltram which no ill-doing could blot out.

So he tended the convalescent's couch with a quiet devotion that touched the sinner very deeply, and there was a peace between those two which had in it something almost sacred. In the mind of the one there was a remorseful sense of guilt, in the heart of the other a pitying tenderness too deep for words.

One night, as they were together on opposite sides of the fire, John Saltram lying on a low sofa drawn close to the hearth, Gilbert seated lazily in an easy-chair, the invalid broke out suddenly into a kind of apology for his wrong-doing.

The conversation had flagged between them after the tea-things had been removed by the brisk little serving-maid of the lodgings ; Gilbert gazing meditatively at the fire, John Saltram so quiet that his companion had thought him asleep.

'I said once that I would tell you all about that business,' he began at last, in a sudden spasmodic way ; 'but, after all, there is so little to tell. There is no excuse for what I did ; I know that better than you can know it. A man in my position, who had a spark of generosity or honour, would have strangled his miserable passion in its birth, would have gone away directly he discovered

his folly, and never looked upon Marian Nowell's face again. I did try to do that, Gilbert. You remember that last night we ever spent together at Lidford—what a feverishly-happy night it was ; only a cottage-parlour with a girl's bright face shining in the lamplight, and a man over head and ears in love, but a glimpse of paradise to that man. I meant that it should be the last of my weakness, Gilbert. I had pledged myself to that by all the unspoken oaths wherewith a man can bind himself to do his duty. And I did turn my back upon the scene of my temptation, as you know, heartily resolved never to approach the edge of the pit again. I think if you had stayed in England, Gilbert, if you had been on the spot to defend your own rights, all would have gone well, I should have kept the promise I had made for myself.'

‘It was so much the more sacred because of my absence, John,’ Gilbert said.

‘Perhaps. After all, I suppose it was only a question of opportunity. That particular devil who tempts men to their dishonour contrived that the business should be made fatally easy for me. You were away, and the coast was clear, you know.

I loved you, Gilbert; but there is a passion stronger than the love which a man feels for his dearest friend. I meant most steadfastly to keep my faith with you; but you were away, and that fellow Forster plagued me to come to him. I refused at first—yes, I held out for a couple of months; but the fever was strong upon me—a restless demon not to be exorcised by hard work, or dissipation even, for I tried both. And then before you were at the end of your journey, while you were still a wanderer across the desolate sea, happy in the thought of your dear love's fidelity, my courage gave way all at once, and I went down to Heatherly. And so I saw her, and saw that she loved me—all unworthy as I was; and from that hour I was a lost man; I thought of nothing but winning her.'

'If you had only been true to me, even then, John; if you had written to me declaring the truth, and giving me fair warning that you were my rival, how much better it would have been! Think what a torture of suspense, what a world of wasted anger, you might have saved me.'

'Yes, it would have been the manlier course, no doubt,' the other answered; 'but I could not

bring myself to that. I could not face the idea of your justifiable wrath. I wanted to win my wife and keep my friend. It was altogether a weak notion, that idea of secrecy, of course, and couldn't hold water for any time, as the result has shown; but I thought you would get over your disappointment quickly—those wounds are apt to heal so speedily—and fall in love elsewhere; and then it would have been easy for me to tell you the truth. So I persuaded my dear love, who was easily induced to do anything I wished, to consent to our secret being kept from you religiously for the time being, and to that end we were married under a false name—not exactly a false name either. You remember my asking you if you had ever heard the name of Holbrook before your hunt after Marian's husband? You said no; yet I think you must have seen the name in some of my old college books. I was christened John Holbrook. My grandmother was one of the Holbrooks of Horley-place, Sussex, people of some importance in their day, and our family were rather proud of the name. But I have dropped it ever since I was a lad.'

‘No, I don't think I can ever have seen the

name ; I must surely have remembered it, if I had seen it.'

'Perhaps so. Well, Gilbert, there is no more to be said. I loved her, selfishly, after the manner of mankind. I could not bring myself to give her up, and pursued her with a passionate persistence which must plead *her* excuse. If her uncle had lived, I doubt whether I should ever have succeeded. But his death left the tender womanly heart weakened by sorrow ; and so I won her, the dearest, truest wife that ever man was blest withal. Yet, I confess to you, so wayward is my nature, that there have been moments in which I repented my triumph—weak hours of doubt and foreboding, in which I fear that dear girl divined my thoughts. Since our wretched separation I have fancied sometimes that a conviction of this kind on her part is at the root of the business, that she has alienated herself from me, believing—in plain words—that I was tired of her.'

'Such an idea as that would scarcely agree with Ellen Carley's account of Marian's state of mind during that last day or two at the Grange. She was eagerly expecting your return, looking

forward with delight to the pleasant surprise you were to experience when you heard of Jacob Nowell's will.'

'Yes, the girl told me that. Great heavens, why did I not return a few days earlier! I was waiting for money, not caring to go back empty-handed; writing and working like a nigger. I dared not meet my poor girl at her grandfather's, since in so doing I must risk an encounter with you.'

After this they talked of Marian's disappearance for some time, going over the same ground very often in their helplessness, and able, at last, to arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. If she were with her father, she was with a bad unscrupulous man. That was a fact which Gilbert Fenton no longer pretended to deny. They sat talking till late, and parted for the night in very different spirits.

Gilbert had a good deal of hard work in the City on the following day; a batch of foreign correspondence too important to be intrusted to a clerk, and two or three rather particular interviews. All this occupied him up to so late an hour, that he was obliged to sleep in London that

night, and to defer his return to Hampton till the next day's business was over. This time he got over his work by an early hour, and was able to catch a train that left Waterloo at half-past five. He felt a little uneasy at having been away from the convalescent so long, though he knew that John Saltram was now strong enough to get on tolerably without him, and that the people of the house were careful and kindly, ready at any moment to give assistance if it were wanted.

'Strange,' he thought to himself, as the train approached the quiet riverside village—'strange that I should be so fond of the fellow, in spite of all; that I should care more for his society than that of any man living. It is the mere force of habit, I suppose. After all these years of liking, the link between us is not to be broken, even by the deepest wrong that one man can do another.'

The spring twilight was closing in as he crossed the bridge and walked briskly along an avenue of leafless trees at the side of the green. The place had a peaceful rustic look at this dusky hour. There were no traces of that modern spoiler the speculative builder just hereabouts; and the

quaint old houses near the barracks, where lights were twinkling feebly here and there, had a look of days that are gone, a touch of that plaintive poetry which pervades all relics of the past. Gilbert felt the charm of the hour; the air still and mild, the silence only broken by the cawing of palatial rooks; and whatever tenderness towards John Saltram there was lurking in his breast seemed to grow upon him as he drew nearer to their lodgings; so that his mood was of the softest when he opened the little garden-gate and went in.

‘I will make no farther pretence of enmity,’ he said to himself; ‘I will not keep up this farce of estrangement. We two will be friends once more. Life is not long enough for the rupture of such a friendship.’

There was no light shining in the parlour window, no pleasant home-glow streaming out upon the night. The blank created by this unwonted darkness chilled him somehow, and there was a vague sense of dread in his mind as he opened the door. There was no need to knock—the simple household was untroubled by the fear of burglariously-disposed intruders, and the door was rarely fastened until after dark.

Gilbert went into the parlour; all was dark and silent in the two rooms, which communicated with folding-doors, and made one fair-sized apartment. There were no preparations for dinner; he could see that in the deepening dusk. The fire had been evidently neglected, and was at an expiring point.

‘John!’ he called, stirring the fire with a vigorous hand, whereby he gave it the *coup de grace*, and the last glimmer sank to darkness. ‘John, what are you doing?’

He fancied the convalescent had fallen asleep upon the sofa in the inner room; but when he went in search of him, he found nothing but emptiness. He rang the bell violently, and the brisk maid-servant came flying in.

‘O dear, sir, you did give me and missus such a turn,’ she said, gasping, with her hand on her heart, as if that organ had been seriously affected. ‘We never heard you come in, and when the bell rung—’

‘Is Mr. Saltram worse?’ Gilbert asked eagerly.

‘Worse, poor dear gentleman; no, sir, I should hope not, though well he may be, for there never was any one so imprudent, not of all the invalids

I've ever had to do with—and Hampton is a rare place for invalids. And I feel sure if you'd been here, sir, you wouldn't have let him do it.'

'Let him do what? Are you crazy, girl? What, in heaven's name, are you talking of?'

'You wouldn't have let him start off to London post-haste, as he did yesterday afternoon, and scarcely able to stand alone, in a manner of speaking.'

'Gone to London! Do you mean to say that my friend Mr. Saltram went to London?'

'Yes, sir; yesterday afternoon between four and five.'

'What utter madness! And when did he come back?'

'Lor bless you, sir, he ain't come back yet. He told missus as his coming back was quite uncertain, and she was not to worry herself about him. She did all she could, almost to going down on her knees, to hinder him going; but it was no use. It was a matter of life and death as he was going upon, he said, and that there was no power on earth could keep him back, not if he was ten times worse than he was. The strange gentleman hadn't been in the house much above

a quarter of an hour, when they was both off together in a fly to the station.'

'What strange gentleman?'

'A stout middle-aged man, sir, with gray whiskers, that came from London, and asked for you first, and then for Mr. Saltram; and those two hadn't been together more than five minutes, when Mr. Saltram rang the bell in a violent hurry, and told my missus he was going to town immediate, on most particular business, and would she pack him a carpet-bag with a couple of shirts, and so on. And then she tried all she could to turn him from going; but it was no good, as I was telling you, sir, just now. Go he would, and go he did; looking quite flushed and bright like when he went out, so as you'd have scarcely known how ill he'd been. And he left a bit of a note for you on the chimbley-piece, sir.'

Gilbert found the note; a hurried scrawl upon half a sheet of paper, twisted up hastily, and unsealed.

'She is found, Gilbert,' wrote John Saltram. 'Proul has traced the father to his lair at last, and my darling is with him. They are lodging at 14 Coleman-street, Tottenham-court-road. I

am off this instant. Don't be angry with me, true and faithful friend ; I could not rest an hour away from her now that she is found. I have no plan of action, but leave all to the inspiration of the moment. You can follow me whenever you please. Marian must thank you for your goodness to me. Marian must persuade you to forgive my sin against you.—Ever yours, J. S.'

Follow him ! yes, of course. Gilbert had no other thought. And she was found at last, after all their suspense, their torturing anxiety. She was found ; and whatever danger there might be in her association with Percival Nowell, she was safe so far, and would be speedily extricated from the perilous alliance by her husband. It seemed at first so happy a thing that Gilbert could scarcely realise it ; and yet, throughout the weary interval of ignorance as to her fate, he had always declared his belief in her safety. Had he been really as confident as he had seemed, as the days had gone by, one after another, without bringing him any tidings of her ? had there been no shapeless terror in his mind, no dark dread that when the knowledge came, it might be something worse than ignorance ? Yes, now in the sudden fulness

of his joy, he knew how much he had feared, how very near he had been to despair.

But John Saltram, what of him? Was it not at the hazard of his life that he had gone upon this sudden journey, reckless and excited, in a fever of hope and delight?

‘Providence will surely be good to him,’ Gilbert thought. ‘He bore the journey from town when he was much worse than he is now. Surely he will bear a somewhat rougher journey now, buoyed up by hope.’

The landlady came in presently, and insisted upon giving Mr. Fenton her own version of the story which he had just heard from her maid; and a very close and elaborate version it was, though not remarkable for any new facts. He was fain to listen to it with a show of patience, however, and to consent to eat a mutton chop, which the good woman insisted upon cooking for him, after his confession that he had eaten nothing since breakfast. He kept telling himself that there was no hurry; that he was not wanted in Coleman-street; that his presence there was a question of his own gratification and nothing else; but the fever in his mind was not to be set at rest

so easily. There was a sense of hurry upon him that he could not shake off, argue with himself as wisely as he would.

He took a hasty meal, and started off to the railway station directly afterwards, though there was no train to carry him back to London for nearly an hour.

It was weary work waiting at the little station, while the keen March wind blew sharply across the unsheltered platform on which Gilbert paced to and fro in his restlessness; weary work waiting, with that sense of hurry and anxiety upon him, not to be shaken off by any effort he could make to take a hopeful view of the future. He tried to think of those two whom he loved best on earth, whose union he had taught himself, by a marvellous effort of unselfishness, to contemplate with serenity, tried to think of them in the supreme happiness of their restoration to each other; but he could not bring his mind to the realisation of this picture. After all those torments of doubt and perplexity which he had undergone during the last three months, the simple fact of Marian's safety seemed too good a thing to be true. He was tortured by a vague

sense of the unreality of this relief that had come so suddenly to put an end to all perplexities.

‘I feel as if I were the victim of some hoax, some miserable delusion,’ he said to himself. ‘Not till I see her, not till I clasp her by the hand, shall I believe that she is really given back to us.’

And in his eagerness to do this, to put an end to that slow torture of unreasonable doubt which had come upon him since the reading of John Saltram’s letter, the delay at the railway station was an almost intolerable ordeal; but the hour came to an end at last, the place awoke from its blank stillness to a faint show of life and motion, a door or two banged, a countrified-looking young woman with a good many bundles and a band-box came out of the waiting-room and arranged her possessions in readiness for the coming train, a porter emerged lazily from some unknown corner and looked up the line—then, after another five minutes of blankness, there came a hoarse throbbing in the distance, a bell rang, and the up-train panted into the station. It was a slow train, unluckily for Gilbert’s impatience, which stopped everywhere, and the journey to London took him

over an hour. It was past nine when a hansom drove him into Coleman-street; a dull unfrequented-looking thoroughfare between Tottenham-court-road and Gower-street, overshadowed a little by the adjacent gloom of the University Hospital, and altogether a low-spirited street.

Gilbert looked up eagerly at the windows of number 14, expecting to see lights shining, and some visible sign of rejoicing, even upon the house front; but there was nothing. Either the shutters were shut, or there was no light within, for the windows were blank and dark. It was a slight thing, but enough to intensify that shapeless foreboding against which he had been struggling throughout his journey.

‘You must have come to the wrong house,’ he said to the cabman as he got out.

‘No, sir, this is 14.’

Yes, it was the right number. Gilbert read it on the door; and yet it could scarcely be the right house; for tied to the door-handle was a placard with ‘Apartments’ engraved upon it, and this house would hardly be large enough to accommodate other lodgers besides Mr. Nowell and his daughter. Yet there is no knowing the capa-

bilities of a London lodging-house in an obscure quarter, and there might be some vacant garret in the roof, or some dreary two-pair back, dignified by the name of 'apartments.' Gilbert gave a loud hurried knock. There was a delay which seemed to him interminable, then a hasty shuffling of slipshod feet upon the basement stairs, then the glimmer of a light through the keyhole, the removal of a chain, and at last the opening of the door. It was opened by a young person with her hair dressed in the prevailing fashion, and an air of some gentility, which clashed a little with a certain slatternliness that pervaded her attire. She was rather a pretty girl, but had the faded London look of late hours and precocious cares, instead of the fresh bloom and girlish brightness which should have belonged to her.

'Did you please to wish to see the apartments, sir?' she asked politely.

'No; I want to see Mr. and Mrs.—the lady and gentleman who are lodging here.'

He scarcely knew under what name he ought to ask for Marian. It seemed unnatural to him now to speak of her as Mrs. Holbrook.

'The lady and gentleman, sir!' the girl ex-

claimed with a surprised air. ‘There’s no one lodging here now. Mr. Nowell and his daughter left yesterday morning.’

‘Left yesterday morning?’

‘Yes, sir. They went away to Liverpool; they are going to America—to New York.’

‘Mr. Nowell and his daughter, Mrs. Holbrook?’

‘Yes, sir, that was the lady’s name.’

‘It’s impossible,’ cried Gilbert; ‘utterly impossible that Mrs. Holbrook would go to America! She has ties that would keep her in England; a husband whom she would never abandon in that manner. There must be some mistake here.’

‘O no, indeed, sir, there’s no mistake. I saw all the luggage labelled with my own eyes, and the direction was New York by steam-packet Oronoco; and Mrs. Holbrook had lots of dresses made, and all sorts of things. And as to her husband, sir, her father told me that he’d treated her very badly, and that she never meant to go back to him again to be made unhappy by him. She was going to New York to live with Mr. Nowell all the rest of her life.’

‘There must have been some treachery, some

underhand work, to bring this about. Did she go of her own free will ?'

' O, dear me, yes, sir. Mr. Nowell was kindness itself to her, and she was very fond of him, and pleased to go to America, as far as I could make out.'

' And she never seemed depressed or unhappy ?'

' I never noticed her being so, sir. They were out a good deal, you see ; for Mr. Nowell was a gay gentleman, very fond of pleasure, and he would have Mrs. Holbrook always with him. They were away in Paris ever so long, in January and the beginning of February, but kept on the lodgings all the same. They were very good lodgers.'

' Had they many visitors ?'

' No, sir ; scarcely any one except a gentleman who used to come sometimes of an evening, and sit drinking spirits-and-water with Mr. Nowell ; he was his lawyer, I believe, but I never heard his name.'

' Did no one come here yesterday to inquire for Mrs. Holbrook towards evening ?'

' Yes, sir ; there was a gentleman came in a cab. He looked very ill, as pale as death, and

was in a dreadful way when he found they were gone. He asked me a great many questions, the same as you've asked me, and I think I never saw any one so cut-up as he seemed. He didn't say much about that either, but it was easy to see it in his face. He wanted to look at the apartments, to see whether he could find anything, an old letter or suchlike, that might be a help to him in going after his friends, and mother took him upstairs.'

'Did he find anything?'

'No, sir; Mr. Nowell hadn't left so much as a scrap of paper about the place. So the gentleman thanked mother, and went away in the same cab as had brought him.'

'Do you know where he was going?'

'I fancy he was going to Liverpool after Mr. Nowell and his daughter. He seemed all in a fever, like a person that's ready to do anything desperate. But I heard him tell the cabman Cavendish-square.'

'Cavendish-square! Yes, I can guess where he was going. But what could he want there?' Gilbert said to himself, while the girl stared at him wonderingly, thinking that he, as well as the

other gentleman, had gone distraught on account of Mr. Nowell's daughter.

'Thank you for answering my questions so patiently, and good-night,' said Gilbert, slipping some silver into her hand; for his quick eye had observed the faded condition of her finery, and a general air of poverty conspicuous in her aspect. 'Stay,' he added, taking out his card-case; 'if you should hear anything farther of these people, I should be much obliged by your sending me word at that address.'

'I won't forget, sir; not that I think we're likely to hear any more of them, they being gone straight off to America.'

'Perhaps not. But if you do hear anything, let me know.'

He had dismissed his cab on alighting in Coleman - street, believing that his journey was ended; but the walk to Cavendish-square was a short one, and he set out at a rapid pace.

The check that had befallen him was a severe one. It seemed a deathblow to all hope, a dreary realisation of that vague dread which had pursued him from the first. If Marian had indeed started for America, what new difficulties must needs

attend every effort to bring her back ; since it was clear that her father's interests were involved in keeping her under his influence, and separating her entirely from her husband. The journey to New York was no doubt intended to secure this state of things. In America, in that vast country, with which this man was familiar by long residence, how easy for him to hide her for ever from her friends ! how vain would all inquiries, all researches be likely to prove !

At the ultimate moment, in the hour of hope and rejoicing, she was lost to them irrevocably.

‘ Yet criminals have been traced upon the other side of the Atlantic, where the police have been prompt to follow them,’ Gilbert said to himself, glancing for an instant at the more hopeful side of the question ; ‘ but not often where they’ve had anything like a start. Did John Saltram really mean to follow those two to Liverpool, I wonder ? Such a journey would seem like madness, in his state ; and yet what a triumph if he should have been in time to prevent their starting by the Oronoco !’

And then, after a pause, he asked himself,
‘ What could he want with Mrs. Branston, at

a time when every moment was precious ? Money, perhaps. He could have had none with him. Yes, money, no doubt ; but I shall discover that from her presently, and may learn something of his plans into the bargain.'

Gilbert went into a stationer's shop in Goodge-street and purchased a *Bradshaw*. There was a train leaving Euston - square for Liverpool at a quarter to eleven. He might be in time for that, after seeing Mrs. Branston. That lady happened fortunately to be at home, and received Gilbert alone in her favourite back drawing-room, where he found her ensconced in that snug retreat made by the six-leaved Japanese screen, which formed a kind of temple on one side of the fire-place. There had been a final rupture between Adela and Mrs. Pallinson a few days before, and that matron, having shown her cards a little too plainly, had been routed by an unwonted display of spirit on the part of the pretty little widow. She was gone, carrying all her belongings with her, and leaving peace and liberty behind her. The flush of triumph was still upon Mrs. Branston ; and this unexpected victory, brief and sudden in its occurrence, like most great victories, was almost

a consolation to her for that disappointment which had stricken her so heavily of late.

Adela Branston welcomed her visitor very graciously ; but Gilbert had no time to waste upon small talk, and after a hasty apology for his untimely intrusion, dashed at once into the question he had come to ask.

‘ John Saltram was with you yesterday evening, Mrs. Branston,’ he said. ‘ Pray tell me the purpose that brought him here, and anything you know of his plan of action after leaving you.’

‘ I can tell you very little about that. He was going upon a journey, he told me, that evening, immediately indeed ; a most important journey ; but he did not tell me where he was going.’

‘ I think I can guess that,’ said Gilbert. ‘ Did he seem much agitated ?’

‘ No ; he was quite calm ; but he had a resolute air, like a man who has some great purpose to achieve. I thought him looking very white and weak, and told him that I was sure he was too ill to start upon a long journey, or any journey. I begged him not to go, if it were possible to avoid going, and used every argument I could think of to persuade him to abandon the idea of such a

thing. But it was all no use. "If I had only a dozen hours to live, I must go," he said.'

'He came to ask you for money for his journey, did he not?'

'He did. I suppose to so close a friend as you are to him, there can be no breach of confidence in my admitting that. He came to borrow any ready money I might happen to have in the house. Fortunately, I had a hundred and twenty pounds by me in hard cash.'

'And he took that? he wanted as much as that?' asked Gilbert eagerly.

'Yes, he said he was likely to require as much as that.'

'Then he must have thought of going to America.'

'To America! travel to America in his weak state of health?' cried Mrs. Branston, aghast.

'Yes. It seems like madness, does it not? But there are circumstances under which a man may be excused for being almost mad. John Salttram has gone in pursuit of some one very dear to him, some one who has been separated from him by treachery.'

'A woman?'

Adela Branston's fair face flushed crimson as she asked the question. A woman? Yes, no doubt he was in pursuit of that woman whom he loved better than her.

'I cannot stop to answer a single question now, my dear Mrs. Branston,' Gilbert said gently. 'You shall know all by and by, and I am sure your generous heart will forgive any wrong that has been done you in this business. Good-night. I have to catch a train at a quarter to eleven; I am going to Liverpool.'

'After Mr. Saltram?'

'Yes; I do not consider him in a fitting condition to travel alone. I hope to be in time to prevent his doing anything rash.'

'But how will you find him?'

'I must make a round of the hotels till I discover his head-quarters. Good-night.'

'Let me order my carriage to take you to the station.'

'A thousand thanks, but I shall be there before your carriage would be ready. I can pick up a cab close by and shall have time to call at my lodgings for a carpet-bag. Once more, good-night.'

It was still dark when Gilbert Fenton arrived at Liverpool. He threw himself upon a sofa in the waiting-room, where he had an hour or so of uncomfortable, unrefreshing sleep, and then roused himself and went out to begin his round of the hotels.

A surly fly-driver of unknown age and prodigious deafness carried him from house to house ; first to all the principal places of entertainment, aristocratic, family, and commercial ; then to more obscure taverns and boarding-houses, until the sun was high and the commerce of Liverpool in full swing ; and at all these places Gilbert questioned night-porters, and chief waiters, and head chamber-maids, until his brain grew dizzy by mere repetition of his questions ; but no positive tidings could he obtain of John Saltram. There was a coffee-house near the quay where it seemed just possible that he had slept ; but even here the description was of the vaguest, and the person described might just as well have been John Smith as John Saltram. Gilbert dismissed the fly-man and his vehicle at last, thoroughly wearied out with that morning's work.

He went to one of the hotels, took a hasty

breakfast, and then hurried off to the offices belonging to the owners of the *Oronoco*.

That vessel had started for New York at nine o'clock on the previous morning, and John Saltram had gone with her. His name was the last in the list of passengers ; he had only taken his passage an hour before the steamer left Liverpool, but there his name was in black and white. The names of Percival Nowell, and of Mrs. Holbrook, his daughter, were also in the list. The whole business was clear enough, and there was nothing more that Gilbert could do. Had John Saltram been strong and well, his friend would have felt nothing but satisfaction in the thought that he was going in the same vessel with Marian, and would without doubt bring her back in triumph. But the question of his health was a painful one to contemplate. Could he, or could he not, endure the strain that he had put upon himself within the last eight-and-forty hours ? In desperate straits men can do desperate things—there was always that fact to be remembered ; but still John Saltram might break down under the burden he had taken upon himself ; and when Gilbert went back to London that after-

noon he was sorely anxious about this feeble traveller.

He found a letter from him at the lodgings in Wigmore-street; a hurried letter written at Liverpool the night before John Saltram's departure. He had arrived there too late to get on board the Oronoco that night, and had ascertained that the vessel was to leave at nine next morning.

‘I shall take my passage in her in case of the worst,’ he wrote; ‘and if I cannot see Marian and persuade her to come on shore with me, I must go with her to New York. Heaven knows what power her father may use against me in the brief opportunity I shall have for seeing her before the vessel starts; but he can't prevent my being their fellow-passenger, and once afloat it shall go hard with me if I cannot make my dear girl hear reason. Do not be uneasy about my health, dear old friend; you see how well I am keeping up under all this strain upon body and mind. You will see me come back from America a new man, strong enough to prove my gratitude for your devotion, in some shape or other, I trust in God.’

CHAPTER IX.

OUTWARD BOUND.

THE bustle of departure was at its culminating-point when John Saltram went on board the Oronoco, captain and officers scudding hither and thither, giving orders and answering inquiries at every point, with a sharp, short, decisive air, as of commanding powers in the last half-hour before a great battle; steward and his underlings ubiquitous; passengers roaming vaguely to and fro, in quest of nothing particular, and in a state of semi-distraction.

In this scene of confusion there was no one to answer Mr. Saltram's eager inquiries about those travellers whom he had pursued to this point. He did contrive, just about ten minutes before the vessel sailed, to capture the ubiquitous steward by the button-hole, and to ask for tidings of Mr. Nowell, before that excited functionary could wrench himself away.

‘Mr. Nowell, sir; upon my word, sir, I can’t say. Yes, there is a gentleman of that name on board; state-rooms number 5 and 7; got a daughter with him—tall dark gentleman, with a moustache and beard. Yes, sir, he was on deck just now, on the bridge; but I don’t see him, I suppose he’s gone below. Better look for him in the saloon, sir.’

The ten minutes were over before John Salttram had seen half the faces on board the crowded vessel; but in his hurried wanderings to and fro, eager to see that one face which he so ardently desired to behold once more, he had met nothing but strangers. There was no help for it: the vessel would steam out seaward presently, and he must needs go with her. At the best, he had expected this. It was not likely that, even if he could have obtained speech with his wife, she could have been prevailed upon immediately to desert the father whose fortunes she had elected to follow, and return to shore with the husband she had abandoned. Her mind must have been poisoned, her judgment perverted, before she could have left him thus of her own free will; and it would need the light of calm reason to set things

right again. No ; John Saltram could scarcely hope to carry her off by a *coup de main*, in the face of the artful schemer who had evidently obtained so strong an influence over her. That she could for a moment contemplate this voyage to America with her father, was enough to demonstrate the revolution that must have taken place in her feelings towards her husband.

‘Slander and lies are very strong,’ John Saltram said to himself ; ‘but I do not think, when my dear love and I are once face to face, any power on earth will prevail against me. She must be changed indeed, if it can ; she must be changed indeed, if anything but a lie can part us.’

He had come on board the Oronoco prepared for the worst, and furnished with a slender outfit for the voyage, hurriedly purchased at a Liverpool clothier’s. He had plenty of money in his pocket —enough to pay for his own and his wife’s return passage ; and the thought of this useless journey across the Atlantic troubled him very little. What did it matter where he was, if she were with him ? The mental torture he had undergone during all this time, in which he had seemed in danger of losing her altogether, had

taught him how dear she was—how precious and perfect a treasure he had held so lightly.

The vessel steamed out of the Mersey, and John Saltram, indifferent to the last glimpse of his native land, was still roaming hither and thither, in quest of the familiar face he longed with such a passionate yearning to see; but up to this point he sought for his wife in vain. Mrs. Holbrook had evidently retired at once to her cabin. There was nothing for him to do but to establish a channel of communication with her by means of the stewardess.

He found this official, with some trouble, and so desperately busy that it was no easy matter to obtain speech with her, pursued as she was by forlorn and distracted female passengers, clamorously eager to know where she had put that ‘waterproof cloak,’ or ‘Maud,’ or ‘travelling-bag,’ or ‘dressing-case.’ He did at last contrive to enlist her services in his behalf, and extort some answer to his questions.

‘Yes,’ she told him, ‘Mrs. Holbrook was on board—state-room number 7. She had gone to her room at once, but would appear at dinner-time, no doubt, if she wasn’t ill.’

John Saltram tore a blank leaf from his pocket-book, and wrote one hasty line :

‘I am here, Marian; let me see you, for God’s sake. JOHN HOLBROOK.’

'If you'll take that to the lady in number 7, I shall be exceedingly obliged,' he said to the stewardess, slipping half-a-crown into her willing hand at the same time.

‘Yes, sir, this very minute, sir.’

John Saltram sat down upon a bench outside the ladies' cabin, in a sort of antechamber between the steward's pantry and store-rooms, strongly perfumed with the odour of grocery, and waited for Marian's coming. He had no shadow of doubt that she would come to him instantly, in defiance of any other guardian or counsellor. Whatever lies might have been told her—however she might have been taught to doubt him—he had a perfect faith in the power of his immediate presence. They had but to meet face to face, and all would be well.

Indeed, there was need that things should be well for John Saltram very speedily. He had set nature at defiance so far, acting as if physical

weakness were unknown to him. There are periods in a man's life in which nothing seems impossible to him ; in which by the mere force of will he triumphs over impossibility. But such conquests are apt to be of the briefest. John Saltram felt that he must very soon break down. The heavily throbbing heart, the aching limbs, the dizzy sight, and parched throat, told him how much this desperate chase had cost him. If he had strength enough to clasp his wife's hand, to give her loving greeting and tell her that he was true, it would be about as much as he could hope to achieve ; and then he felt that he would be glad to crawl into any corner of the vessel where he might find rest.

The stewardess came back to him presently, with rather a discomfited air.

‘ The lady says she is too ill to see any one, sir,’ she told John Saltram ; ‘ but under any circumstances she must decline to see you.’

‘ She said that—my wife told you that ?’

‘ Your wife, sir ! Good gracious me, is the lady in number 7 your wife ? She came on board with her father, and I understood they were only two in party.’

‘Yes; she came with her father. Her father’s treachery has separated her from me; but a few words would explain everything, if I could only see her.’

He thought it best to tell the woman the truth, strange as it might seem to her. Her sympathies were more likely to be enlisted in his favour if she knew the actual state of the case.

‘Did Mrs. Holbrook positively decline to see me?’ he asked again, scarcely able to believe that Marian could have resisted even that brief appeal scrawled upon a scrap of paper.

‘She did indeed, sir,’ answered the stewardess. ‘Nothing could be more positive than her manner. I told her how anxious you seemed—for I could see it in your face, you see, sir, when you gave me the paper—and I really didn’t like to bring you such a message; but it was no use. “I decline to see him,” the lady said, “and be sure you bring me no more messages from this gentleman;” and with that, sir, she tore up the bit of paper, as cool as could be. But, dear me, sir, how ill you do look, to be sure !’

‘I have been very ill. I came from a sick-room to follow my wife.’

‘Hadn’t you better go and lie down a little, sir? You look as if you could scarcely stand. Shall I fetch the steward for you?’

‘No, thanks. I can find my way to my berth, I daresay. Yes, I suppose I had better go and lie down. I can do no more yet awhile.’

He could do no more, and had indeed barely strength to stagger to his sleeping-quarters, which he discovered at last with some difficulty. Here he flung himself down, dressed as he was, and lay like a log, for hours, not sleeping, but powerless to move hand or foot, and with his brain racked by torturing thoughts.

‘As soon as I am able to stand again, I will see her father, and exact a reckoning from him,’ he said to himself again and again, during those long dreary hours of prostration; but when the next day came, he was too weak to raise himself from his narrow bed, and on the next day after that he was no better. The steward was much concerned by his feeble condition, especially as it was no common case of sea-sickness; for John Saltram had told him that he was never sea-sick. He brought the prostrate traveller soda-water and brandy, and tried to tempt him to eat rich soups

of a nutritious character ; but the sick man would take nothing except an occasional draught of soda-water.

On the third day of the voyage the steward was very anxious to bring the ship's surgeon to look at Mr. Saltram ; but against this John Saltram resolutely set his face.

‘ For pity's sake, don't bore me with any more doctors ! ’ he cried fretfully. ‘ I have had enough of that kind of thing. The man can do nothing for me. I am knocked-up with over-exertion and excitement—that's all ; my strength will come back to me sooner or later if I lie quietly here.’

The steward gave way, for the time being, upon this appeal, and the surgeon was not summoned ; but Mr. Saltram's strength seemed very slow to return to him. He could not sleep ; he could only lie there listening to all the noises of the ship, the perpetual creaking and rattling, and tramping of footsteps above his head, and tortured by his impatience to be astir again. He would not stand upon punctilio this time, he told himself ; he would go straight to the door of Marian's cabin, and stand there until she came out to him. Was she not his wife—his very own—

powerless to hold him at bay in this manner? His strength did not come back to him; that wakeful prostration in which the brain was always busy, while the aching body lay still, did not appear to be a curative process. In the course of that third night of the voyage John Saltram was delirious, much to the alarm of his fellow-passenger, the single sharer of his cabin, a nervous elderly gentleman, who objected to his illness altogether as an outrage upon himself, and was indignantly desirous to know whether it was contagious.

So the doctor was brought to the sick man early next morning whether he would or not, and went through the usual investigations, and promised to administer the usual sedatives, and assured the anxious passenger that Mr. Saltram's complaint was in nowise infectious.

'He has evidently been suffering from serious illness lately, and has been over-exerting himself,' said the doctor; 'that seems very clear. We shall contrive to bring him round in a few days, I dare-say, though he certainly has got into a very low state.'

The doctor said this rather gravely, on which the passenger again became disturbed of aspect.

A death on board ship must needs be such an unpleasant business, and he really had not bargained for anything of that kind. What was the use of paying first-class fare on board a first-class vessel, if one were subject to annoyance of this sort? In the steerage of an over-crowded emigrant-ship such a thing might be a matter of course—a mere natural incident of the voyage—but on board the *Oronoco* it was most unlooked-for.

‘He’s not going to die, is he?’ asked the passenger, with an injured air.

‘O dear, no, I should hope not. I have no apprehension of that sort,’ replied the surgeon promptly.

He would no doubt have said the same thing up to within an hour or so of the patient’s decease.

‘There is an extreme debility, that is all,’ he went on quite cheerfully; ‘and if we can induce him to take plenty of nourishment, we shall get on very well, I daresay.’

After this the nervous passenger was profoundly interested in the amount of refreshment consumed by the patient, and questioned the steward about him with a most sympathetic air.

John Saltram, otherwise John Holbrook, was not destined to die upon this outward voyage. He was very eager to be well, or at least to be at liberty to move about again; and perhaps this impatient desire of his helped in some measure to bring about his recovery. The will, physiologists tell us, has a great deal to do with these things.

The voyage was a prosperous one. The good ship steamed gaily across the Atlantic through the bleak spring weather; and there was plenty of eating and drinking and joviality and flirtation on board her, while John Saltram lay upon his back, very helpless, languishing to be astir once more.

During these long dreary days and nights he had contrived to send several messages to the lady in the state-cabin, feeble pencil-scrawls, imploring her to come to him, telling her that he was very ill, at death's door almost, and desired nothing so much as to see her, if only for a moment. But the answer—by word of mouth of the steward or stewardess always—was unfailingly to the same effect;—the lady in number 7 refused to hold any communication with the sick gentleman.

‘She’s a hard one!’ the steward remarked to the stewardess, when they talked the matter over in a comfortable manner during the progress of a snug little supper in the steward’s cabin. ‘She must be an out-and-out hard-hearted one to stand out against him like that, if he is her husband, and I suppose he is. I told her to-day—when I took his message—how bad he was, and that it was a chance if he ever went ashore alive; but she was walking up and down deck with her father ten minutes afterwards, laughing and talking like anything. I suppose he’s been a bad lot, Mrs. Peterson, and deserves no better from her; but still it does seem hard to see him lying there, and his wife so near him, and yet refusing to go and see him.’

‘I’ve no common patience with her,’ said the stewardess with acrimony; ‘the cold-hearted creature!—flaunting about like that, with a sick husband within a stone’s throw of her. Suppose he is to blame, Mr. Martin; whatever his faults may have been, it isn’t the time for a wife to remember them.’

To this Mr. Martin responded dubiously, remarking that there were some carryings-on upon

the part of husbands which it was difficult for a wife not to remember.

The good ship sped on, unhindered by adverse winds or foul weather, and was within twenty-four hours of her destination when John Saltram was at last able to crawl out of the cabin, where he had lain for some eight or nine days crippled and helpless.

The first purpose which he set himself to accomplish was an interview with Marian's father. He wanted to grapple his enemy somehow—to ascertain the nature of the game that was being played against him. He had kept himself very quiet for this purpose, wishing to take Percival Nowell by surprise; and on this last day but one of the voyage, when he was able for the first time to rise from his berth, no one but the steward and the surgeon knew that he intended so to rise.

He had taken the steward in some measure into his confidence; and that official, after helping him to dress, left him seated in the cabin, while he went to ascertain the whereabouts of Mr. Nowell. Mr. Martin, the steward, came back after about five minutes.

‘He’s in the saloon, sir, reading, quite alone.

You couldn't have a better opportunity of speaking to him.'

' That's a good fellow. Then I'll go at once.'

' You'd better take my arm, sir; you're as weak as a baby, and the ship lurches a good deal to-day.'

' I'm not very strong, certainly. I begin to think I never shall be strong again. Do you know, Martin, I was once stroke in a university eight? Not much vigour in my biceps now, eh?'

It was only a few paces from one cabin to the other; but Mr. Saltram could scarcely have gone so far without the steward's supporting arm. He was a feeble-looking figure, with a white wan face, as he tottered along the narrow passage between the tables, making his way to that end of the saloon where Percival Nowell lounged luxuriously, with his legs stretched at full length upon the sofa, and a book in his hand.

' Mr. Nowell, I believe,' said the sick man, as the other looked up at him with consummate coolness. Whatever his feelings might be with regard to his daughter's husband, he had had ample time to prepare himself for an encounter with him.

‘Yes, my name is Nowell. But I have really not the honour to—’

‘You do not know me,’ answered John Salttram. ‘No, but it is time you did so. I am your daughter’s husband, John Holbrook.’

‘Indeed. I have heard that she has been persecuted by the messages of some person calling himself her husband. You are that person, I presume.’

‘I have tried to persuade my wife to see me. Yes; and I mean to see her before this vessel arrives in port.’

‘But if the lady in question refuses to have anything to say to you?’

‘We shall soon put that to the test. I have been too ill to stir ever since I came on board, or you would have heard of me before this, Mr. Nowell. Now that I can move about once more, I shall find a way to assert my claims, you may be sure. But in the first place, I want to know by what right you stole my wife away from her home —by what right you brought her on this voyage?’

‘Before I answer that question, Mr.—Mr. Holbrook, as you choose to call yourself, I’ll ask you another. By what right do you call yourself

my daughter's husband ? what evidence have you to produce to prove that you are not a barefaced impostor ? You don't carry your marriage-certificate about with you, I daresay ; and in the absence of some kind of documentary evidence, what is to convince me that you are what you pretend to be—my daughter's husband ?

‘ The evidence of your daughter's own senses. Place me face to face with her ; she will not deny my identity. ’

‘ But how, if my daughter declines to see you, as she does most positively ? She has suffered enough at your hands, and is only too glad to be released from you. ’

‘ She has suffered—she is glad to be released ! Why, you most consummate scoundrel,’ cried John Saltram, ‘ there never was an unkind word spoken between my wife and me ! She was the best, most devoted of women ; and nothing but the vilest treachery could have separated us. I know not what villainous slander you have made her believe, or by what means you lured her away from me ; but I know that a few words between us would let in the light upon your plot. You had better make the best of a bad position, Mr. Nowell. ’

As my wife's father, you know, you are pretty sure to escape. Whatever my inclination might be, my regard for her would make me indulgent to you. You'll find candour avail you best in this case, depend upon it. Your daughter has inherited a fortune, and you want to put your hand upon it altogether. It would be wiser to moderate your desires, and be content with a fair share of the inheritance. Your daughter is not the woman to treat you ungenerously, nor am I the man to create any hindrance to her generosity.'

'I can make no bargain with you, sir,' replied Mr. Nowell, with the same cool audacity of manner that had distinguished him throughout the interview; 'nor am I prepared to admit your claim to the position you assume. But if my daughter is your wife, she left you of her own free will, under no coercion of mine; and she must return to you in the same manner, or you must put the machinery of the law in force to compel her. And *that*, I flatter myself, in a free country like America, will be rather a difficult business.'

It was hard for John Saltram to hear any man talk like this, and not be able to knock him down. But in his present condition Marian's husband

could not have grappled a child, and he knew it.

‘ You are an outrageous scoundrel ! ’ he said between his set teeth, tortured by that most ardent desire to dash his clenched fist into Mr. Nowell’s handsome dissolute-looking face. ‘ You are a most consummate villain, and you know it ! ’

‘ Hard words mean so little,’ returned Mr. Nowell coolly, ‘ and go for so little. That kind of language before witnesses would be actionable ; but, upon my word, it would be mere child’s play on my part to notice it, especially to a man in your condition. You’d better claim your wife from the captain, and see what he will say to you. I have told him that there’s some semi-lunatic on board, who pretends to be Mrs. Holbrook’s husband ; so he’ll be quite prepared to hear your statement.’

John Saltram left the saloon in silence. It was worse than useless talking to this man, who presumed upon his helpless state, and openly defied him. His next effort must be to see Marian.

This he found impossible, for the time being at any rate. The state-room number 7 was an apartment a little bigger than a rabbit-hutch,

opening out of a larger cabin, and in that cabin there reposed a ponderous matron who had suffered from sea-sickness throughout the voyage, and who could in no wise permit a masculine intruder to invade the scene of her retirement.

The idea of any blockade of Marian's door was therefore futile. He must needs wait as patiently as he might, till she appeared of her own free will. He could not have to wait very long; something less than a day and a night, the steward had told him, would bring them to the end of the voyage.

Mr. Saltram went on deck, still assisted by the friendly steward, and seated himself in a sheltered corner of the vessel, hoping that the sea-breeze might bring him back some remnant of his lost strength. The ship's surgeon had advised him to get a little fresh air as soon as he felt himself able to bear it; so he sat in his obscure nook, very helpless and very feeble, meditating upon what he should do when the final moment came and he had to claim his wife.

He had no idea of making his wrongs known to the captain, unless as a last desperate resource. He could not bring himself to make Marian the

subject of a vulgar squabble. No, it was to herself alone he would appeal ; it was in the natural instinct of her own heart that he would trust.

Very long and weary seemed the remaining hours of that joyless voyage. Mr. Saltram was fain to go back to his cabin after an hour on deck, there to lie and await the morrow. He had need to husband his strength for the coming encounter. The steward told him in the evening that Mrs. Holbrook had not dined in the saloon that day, as usual. She had kept her cabin closely, and complained of illness.

The morning dawned at last, after what had seemed an endless night to John Saltram, lying awake in his narrow berth—a bleak blusterous morning, with the cold gray light staring in at the port-hole, like an unfriendly face. There was no promise in such a daybreak ; it was only light, and nothing more.

Mr. Saltram, having duly deliberated the matter during the long hours of that weary night, had decided that his wisest course was to lie *perdu* until the last moment, the very moment of landing, and then to come boldly forward and

make his claim. It was useless to waste his strength in any futile endeavour to baffle so hardy a scoundrel as Percival Nowell. At the last, when Marian was leaving the ship, it would be time for him to assert his right as her husband, and to defy the wretch who had beguiled her away from him.

Having once arrived at this decision, he was able to await the issue of events with some degree of tranquillity. He had no doubt, even now, of his wife's affection for him, no fear as to the ultimate triumph of her love over all the lies and artifices of that scheming scoundrel, her father.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when the steward came to tell him that they were on the point of arriving at their destination. The wharf where they were to land was within sight. The man had promised to give him due warning of this event, and John Saltram had therefore contrived to keep himself quiet amidst all the feverish impatience and confusion of mind prevailing amongst the other passengers. He was rewarded for his prudence; for when he rose to go on deck, he found himself stronger than he

had felt yet. He went upstairs, took his place close to the spot at which the passengers must all leave the vessel, and waited.

New York was very near. The day had been cold and showery, but the sun was shining now, and the whole scene looked bright and gay. Every one seemed in high spirits, as if the new world they were about to touch contained for them a certainty of Elysium. It was such a delicious relief to arrive at the great lively Yankee city, after the tedium of a ten days' voyage, pleasant and easy as the transit had been.

John Saltram looked eagerly among the faces of the crowd, but neither Percival Nowell nor his daughter were to be seen amongst them. Presently the vessel touched the wharf, and the travellers began to move towards the gangway. He watched them, one by one, breathlessly. At the very last, Mr. Nowell stepped quickly forward, with a veiled figure on his arm.

She was closely veiled, her face quite hidden by thick black lace, and she was clinging with something of a frightened air to her companion's arm.

John Saltram sprang up from his post of

observation, and confronted the two before they could leave the vessel.

‘Marian,’ he said, in a low decided tone, ‘let go that man’s arm. You will leave this vessel with me, and with no one else.’

‘Stand out of the way, fellow,’ cried Percival Nowell; ‘my daughter can have nothing to say to you.’

‘Marian, for God’s sake, obey me! There is the vilest treachery in this man’s conduct. Let go his arm. My love, my darling, come with me!’

There was a passionate appeal in his tone, but it produced no answer.

‘Marian!’ he cried, still interposing himself between these two and the passage to the landing wharf. ‘Marian, I will have some answer!’

‘You have had your answer, sir,’ said Percival Nowell, trying to push him aside. ‘This lady does not know you. Do you want to make a scene, and render yourself ridiculous to every one here? There are plenty of lunatic asylums in New York that will accommodate you, if you are determined to make yourself eligible for them.’

‘Marian!’ repeated John Saltram, without

vouchsafing the faintest notice of this speech.
‘Marian, speak to me !’

And then, as there came no answer from that shrinking clinging figure, with a sudden spring forward, that brought him quite close to her, John Saltram tore the veil away from the hidden face.

‘This must be some impostor,’ he said ; ‘this is not my wife.’

He was right. The creature clinging to Percival Nowell’s arm was a pretty woman enough, with rather red hair, and a common face. She was about Marian’s height ; and that was the only likeness between them.

The spectators of this brief fracas crowded round the actors in it, seeing nothing but the insult offered to a lady, and highly indignant with John Saltram ; and amidst their murmurs Percival Nowell pushed his way to the shore, with the woman still clinging to his arm.

CHAPTER X.

THE PLEASURES OF WYNCOMB.

THAT shrill anguish-stricken cry which Ellen Whitelaw had heard on the night of the stranger's visit to Wyncomb Farm haunted her afterwards with a wearisome persistence. She could not forget that wild unearthly sound; she could not help continually trying to find some solution for the mystery, until her brain was tired with the perpetual effort.

Ponder upon this matter as she might, she could find no reasonable explanation of the enigma; and in spite of her common sense—a quality of which she possessed a very fair share—she was fain to believe at last that this grim bare-looking old house was haunted, and that the agonised shriek she and Mrs. Tadman had heard that night was only the ghostly sound of some cry wrung from a bleeding heart in days gone by, the echo of an anguish that had been in the far past.

She even went so far as to ask her husband one day if he had ever heard that the house was haunted, and whether there was any record of crime or wrong that had been done in it in the past. Mr. Whitelaw seemed scarcely to relish the question; but after one of his meditative pauses laughed his wife's inquiry to scorn, and told her that there were no ghosts at Wynecomb except the ghosts of dead rats that had ravaged the granaries—and certainly *they* seemed to rise from their graves in spite of poison and traps, cats and ferrets—and that as to anything that had been done in the house in days gone by, he had never heard tell that his ancestors had ever done anything but eat and drink and sleep, and save money from year's end to year's end; and a hard time they'd had of it to pay their way and put something by, in the face of all the difficulties that surround the path of a farmer.

If Ellen Whitelaw's life had been as the lives of happier women, full of small daily cares and all-engrossing domestic interests, the memory of that unearthly scream would no doubt have faded out of her mind ere long, instead of remaining, as it did, a source of constant perplexity to her. But

there was no interest, no single charm in her life. There was nothing in the world left for her to care for. The fertile flats around Wyncomb Farmhouse bounded her universe. Day by day she rose to perform the same monotonous duties, sustained by no lofty aim, cheered by neither friendship nor affection ; for she could not teach herself to feel anything warmer than toleration for her daily companion, Mrs. Tadman — only working laboriously because existence was more endurable to her when she was busy than when she was idle. It was scarcely strange, then, that she brooded upon the memory of that night when the nameless stranger had come to Wyncomb, and that she tried to put the fact of his coming and that other incident of the cry together, and to make something out of the two events by that means ; but put them together as she might, she was no nearer any solution of the mystery. That her husband and the stranger could have failed to hear that piercing shriek seemed almost impossible ; yet both had denied hearing it. The story of the stranger having knocked his shin and cried out on doing so, appeared like a feeble attempt to account for that wild cry. Vain and

hopeless were all her endeavours to arrive at any reasonable explanation, and her attempts to get anything like an opinion out of Mrs. Tadman were utterly useless. Mr. Whitelaw's cousin was still inclined to take a gloomy view of the stranger's visit, in spite of her kinsman's assurance that the transaction between himself and the unknown was a profitable one. Horseracing—if not parting with the farm—Mrs. Tadman opined was at the bottom of the business ; and when did horseracing ever fail to lead to ruin sooner or later ? It was only a question of time. Ellen sighed, remembering how her father had squandered his employer's money on the racecourse, and how, for that folly of his, she had been doomed to become Stephen Whitelaw's wife. But there did not seem to her to be anything of the horsey element in her husband's composition. He was never away from home, except to attend to his business at market ; and she had never seen him spelling over the sporting-papers, as her father had been wont to do, night after night, with a perplexed brow and an anxious face, making calculations upon the margin of the print every now and then with a stump of lead pencil, and chewing

the end of it meditatively in the intervals of his lection.

Although Mrs. Whitelaw did not, like Mrs. Tadman, associate the idea of the stranger's visit with any apprehension of her husband's impending ruin, she could not deny that some kind of change had arisen in him since that event. He had always drunk a good deal, in his slow quiet manner, which impressed people unacquainted with his habits with a notion of his sobriety, even when he was steadily emptying the bottle before him; but he drank more now, and sat longer over his drink, and there was an aspect of trouble and uneasiness about him at times which fairly puzzled his wife. Of course the most natural solution for all this was the one offered by the dismally prophetic Tadman. Stephen Whitelaw had been speculating or gambling, and his affairs were in disorder. He was not a man to be affected by anything but the most sordid considerations, one would suppose. Say that he had lost money, and there you had a key to the whole.

He got into a habit of sitting up at night, after the rest of the household had gone to bed. He had done this more or less from the time of his

marriage ; and Mrs. Tadman had told Ellen that the habit was one which had arisen within the last few months.

‘ He would always see to the fastenings of the house with his own eyes,’ Mrs. Tadman said ; ‘ but up to last autumn he used to go upstairs with me and the servants. It’s a new thing for him to sit up drinking his glass of grog in the parlour by himself.’

The new habit seemed to grow upon Mr. Whitelaw more rapidly after that visit of the stranger’s. He took to sitting up till midnight —an awful hour in a farmhouse ; and Ellen generally found the spirit-bottle empty in the morning. Night after night he went to bed soddened with drink. Once, when his kinswoman made some feeble remonstrance with him about this change in his habits, he told her savagely to hold her tongue—he could afford to drink as much as he pleased—he wasn’t likely to come upon *her* to pay for what he took. As for his wife, she unhappily cared nothing what he did. He could not become more obnoxious to her than he had been from the first hour of her acquaintance with him, let him do what he would.

Little by little, finding no other explanation possible, Mrs. Whitelaw grew to believe quite firmly in the supernatural nature of that unforget-
gotten cry. She remembered the unexplainable
footstep which she had heard in the padlocked
room in the early dusk of that new-year's-day,
when Mrs. Tadman and she explored the old
house; and she associated these two sounds in
her mind as of a like ghostly character. From
this time forward she shrank with a nervous ter-
ror from that darksome passage leading to the
padlocked door at the end of the house. She
had never any occasion to go in this direction.
The rooms in this wing were low, dark, and small,
and had been unused for years. It was scarcely
any wonder if rats had congregated behind the
worm-eaten wainscot, to scare nervous listeners
with their weird scratchings and scramblings. But
no one could convince Ellen Whitelaw that the
sounds she had heard on new-year's-day were pro-
duced by anything so earthly as a rat. With that
willingness to believe in a romantic impossibility,
rather than in a commonplace improbability, so
natural to the human mind, she was more ready
to conceive the existence of a ghost than that her

own sense of hearing might have been less powerful than her fancy. About the footsteps she was quite as positive as she was about the scream ; and in the last instance she had the evidence of Mrs. Tadman's senses to support her.

She was surprised to find one day, when the household drudge Martha Holden had been cleaning the passage and rooms in that deserted wing—a task very seldom performed—that the girl had the same aversion to that part of the house which she felt herself, but of which she had never spoken in the presence of the servants.

‘If it wasn’t for Mrs. Tadman driving and worrying after me all the time I’m at work, **I** don’t think I could stay there, mum,’ Martha told her mistress. ‘It isn’t often I like to be fidgeted and followed ; but anything’s better than being alone in that unked place.’

‘It’s rather dark and dreary, certainly, Martha,’ Ellen answered with an admirable assumption of indifference ; ‘but, as we haven’t any of us got to live there, that doesn’t much matter.’

‘It isn’t that, mum. I wouldn’t mind the darkness and the dreariness—and I’m sure such a place for spiders I never did see in my life ;

there was one as I took down with my broom to-day, and serunched, as big as a small crab—but it's worse than that: the place is haunted.'

'Who told you that?'

'Sarah Batts.'

'Sarah Batts! Why, how should she know anything about it? She hasn't been here so long as you; and she came straight from the work-house.'

'I think master must have told her, mum.'

'Your master would never have said anything so foolish. I know that *he* doesn't believe in ghosts; and he keeps all his garden-seeds in the locked room at the end of the passage; so he must go there sometimes himself.'

'O yes, mum; I know that master goes there. I've seen him go that way at night with a candle.'

'Well, you silly girl, he wouldn't use the room if he thought it was haunted, would he? There are plenty more empty rooms in the house.'

'I don't know about that, I'm sure, mum; but anyhow I know Sarah Batts told me that passage was haunted. "Don't you never go there, Martha," she says, "unless you want to have your blood froze. I've heard things there that

have froze mine.' And I never should go, mum, if it wasn't for moth—Mrs. Tadman's worrying and driving, about the place being cleaned once in a way. And Sarah Batts is right, mum, however she may have got to know it; for I have heard things.'

'What things?'

'Moaning and groaning like, as if it was some one in pain; but all very low; and I never could make out where it came from. But as to the place being haunted, I've no more doubt about it than about my catechism.'

'But, Martha, you ought to know it's very silly and wicked to believe in such things,' Ellen Whitelaw said, feeling it her duty to lecture the girl a little, and yet half inclined to believe her. 'The moanings and groanings, as you call them, were only sounds made by the wind, I daresay.'

'O dear no, mum,' Martha answered, shaking her head in a decided manner; 'the wind never made such noises as *I* heard. But I don't want to make you nervous, mum; only I'd sooner lose a month's wages than stay for an hour alone in the west wing.'

It was strange, certainly; a matter of no importance perhaps, this idle belief of a servant's,

these sounds which harmed no one; and yet all these circumstances worried and perplexed Ellen Whitelaw. Having so little else to think of, she brooded upon them incessantly, and was gradually getting into a low nervous way. If she complained, which she did very rarely, there was no one to sympathise with her. Mrs. Tadman had so many ailments of her own, such complicated maladies, such deeply-rooted disorders, that she could be scarcely expected to give much attention to the trivial sufferings of another person.

‘Ah, my dear,’ she would exclaim with a groan, if Ellen ventured to complain of a racking headache, ‘when you’ve lived as long as I have, and gone through what I’ve gone through, and have got such a liver as I’ve got, you’ll know what bad health means. But at your age, and with your constitution, it’s nothing more than fancy.’

And then Mrs. Tadman would branch off into a graphic description of her own maladies, to which Ellen was fain to listen patiently, wondering vaguely as she listened whether the lapse of years would render her as wearisome a person as Mrs. Tadman.

She had no sympathy from any one. Her fa-

ther came to Wyncomb Farm once a week or so, and sat drinking and smoking with Mr. Whitelaw; but Ellen never saw him alone. He seemed carefully to avoid the chance of being alone with her, guiltily conscious of his part in the contriving of her marriage, and fearing to hear some complaint about her lot. He pretended to take it for granted that her fate was entirely happy, congratulated her frequently upon her prosperity, and reminded her continually that it was a fine thing to be the sole mistress of the house she lived in, instead of a mere servant—as he himself was, and as she had been at the Grange—labouring for the profit of other people.

Up to this time Mr. Carley had had some reason to be disappointed with the result of his daughter's marriage, so far as his own prosperity was affected thereby. Not a sixpence beyond that one advance of the two hundred pounds had the bailiff been able to extort from his son-in-law. It was the price that Mr. Whitelaw had paid for his wife, and he meant to pay no more. He told William Carley as much one day when the question of money-matters was pushed rather too far—told him in the plainest language.

This was hard ; but that two hundred pounds had saved the bailiff from imminent destruction. He was obliged to be satisfied with this advantage, and to bide his time.

‘ I’ll have it out of the mean hound sooner or later,’ he muttered to himself as he walked home-wards, after a social evening with the master of Wyncomb.

One evening Mr. Carley brought his daughter a letter. It was from Gilbert Fenton, who was quite unaware of Ellen’s marriage, and had written to her at the Grange. This letter afforded her the only pleasure she had known since fate had united her to Stephen Whitelaw. It told her that Marian Holbrook was living, and in all probability safe—though by no means in good hands. She had sailed for America with her father ; but her husband was in hot pursuit of her, and her husband was faithful.

‘ I have schooled myself to forgive him,’ Gilbert went on to say, ‘ for I know that he loves her—and that must needs condone my wrongs. I look forward anxiously to their return from America, and hope for a happy reunion amongst us all—when your warm friendship shall not be forgotten.

I am waiting impatiently for news from New York, and will write to you again directly I hear anything definite. We have suffered the torments of suspense for a long weary time, but I trust and believe that the sky is clearing.'

This was not much, but it was more than enough to relieve Ellen Carley's mind of a heavy load. Her dear young lady, as she called Marian, was not dead—not lying at the bottom of that cruel river, at which Ellen had often looked with a shuddering horror, of late, thinking of what might be. She was safe, and would no doubt be happy. This was something. Amid the wreck of her own fortunes, Ellen Whitelaw was unselfish enough to rejoice in this.

Her husband asked to see Mr. Fenton's letter, which he spelt over with his usual deliberate air, and which seemed to interest him more than Ellen would have supposed likely—knowing as she did how deeply he had resented Marian's encouragement of Frank Randall's courtship.

'So she's gone to America with her father, has she?' he said, when he had perused the document twice. 'I shouldn't have thought anybody could have persuaded her to leave that precious

husband of hers. And she's gone off to America, and he after her! That's rather a queer start, ain't it, Nell?

Mrs. Whitelaw did not care to discuss the business with her husband. There was something in his tone, a kind of veiled malice, which made her angry.

'I don't suppose you care whether she's alive or dead,' she said impatiently; 'so you needn't trouble yourself to talk about her.'

'Needn't I? O, she's too grand a person to be talked of by such as me, is she? Never mind, Nell; don't be cross. And when Mrs. Holbrook comes back to England, you shall go and see her.'

'I will,' answered Ellen; 'if I have to walk to London to do it.'

'O, but you sha'n't walk. You shall go by rail. I'll spare you the money for that, for once in a way, though I'm not over fond of wasting money.'

Day by day Mr. Whitelaw's habits grew more secluded and morose. It is not to be supposed that he was troubled by those finer feelings which might have made the misery of a better man;

but even in his dull nature there may have been some dim sense that his marriage was a failure and mistake ; that in having his own way in this matter he had in nowise secured his own happiness. He could not complain of his wife's conduct in any one respect. She was obedient to his will in all things, providing for his comfort with scrupulous regularity, industrious, indefatigable even. As a housekeeper and partner of his fortunes, no man could have desired a better wife. Yet dimly, in that sluggish soul, there was the consciousness that he had married a woman who hated him, that he had bought her with a price ; and, being a man prone to think the worst of his fellow-creatures, Mr. Whitelaw believed that, sooner or later, his wife meant to have her revenge upon him somehow. She was waiting for his death perhaps ; calculating that, being so much her senior, and a hardworking man, he would die soon enough to leave her a young widow. And then, of course, she would marry Frank Randall ; and all the money which he, Stephen, had amassed, by the sacrifice of every pleasure in life, would enrich that supercilious young coxcomb.

It was a hard thing to think of, and Stephen pondered upon the expediency of letting off Wyncomb Farm, and sinking all his savings in the purchase of an annuity. He could not bring himself to contemplate selling the house and lands that had belonged to his race for so many generations. He clung to the estate, not from any romantic reverence for the past, not from any sentimental associations connected with those who had gone before him, but from the mere force of habit, which rendered this grim ugly old house and these flat shelterless fields dearer to him than all the rest of the universe. He was a man to whom to part with anything was agony ; and if he loved anything in the world, he loved Wyncomb. The possession of the place had given him importance for twenty years past. He could not fancy himself unconnected with Wyncomb. His labours had improved the estate too ; and he could not endure to think how some lucky purchaser might profit by his prudence and sagacity. There had been some fine old oaks on the land when he inherited it, all mercilessly stubbed-up at the beginning of his reign ; there had been tall straggling hedgerows, all of a tangle with black-

berry-bushes, ferns, and dog-roses, hazel and sloe trees, all done away with by his order. No, he could never bring himself to sell Wynecomb. Nor was the purchase of an annuity a transaction which he was inclined to accomplish. It was a pleasing notion certainly, that idea of concentrating all his hoarded money upon the remaining years of his life—retiring from the toils of agriculture, and giving himself up for the rest of his days to an existence of luxurious idleness. But, on the other hand, it would be a bitter thing to surrender his fondly loved money for the poor return of an income, to deprive himself of all opportunity of speculating and increasing his store.

So the annuity scheme lay dormant in his brain, as it were, for the time being. It was something to have in reserve, and to carry out any day that his wife gave him fair cause to doubt her fidelity.

In the mean time he went on living his lonely sulky kind of life, drinking a great deal more than was good for him in his own churlish manner, and laughing to scorn any attempt at remonstrance from his wife or Mrs. Tadman. Some few times Ellen had endeavoured to awaken him

to the evil consequences that must needs ensue from his intemperate habits, feeling that it would be a sin on her part to suffer him to go on without some effort to check him; but her gently-spoken warnings had been worse than useless.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. WHITELAW MAKES AN END OF THE MYSTERY.

MRS. WHITELAW had been married about two months. It was bright May weather, bright but not yet warm; and whatever prettiness Wyncomb Farm was capable of assuming had been put on with the fresh spring green of the fields and the young leaves of the poplars. There were even a few hardy flowers in the vegetable-garden behind the house, humble perennials planted by dead and gone Whitelaws, which had bloomed year after year in spite of Stephen's utilitarian principles. It was a market-day, the household work was finished, and Ellen was sitting with Mrs. Tadman in the parlour, where those two spent so many weary hours of their lives, the tedium whereof was relieved only by woman's homely resource, needlework. Even if Mrs. Whitelaw had been fond of reading, and she only cared moder-

ately for that form of occupation, she could hardly have found intellectual diversion of that kind at Wyncomb, where a family Bible, a few volumes of the *Annual Register*, which had belonged to some half-dozen different owners before they came from a stall in Malsham Market to the house of Whitelaw, a grim-looking old quarto upon domestic medicine, and a cookery-book, formed the entire library. When the duties of the day were done, and the local weekly newspaper had been read—an intellectual refreshment which might be fairly exhausted in ten minutes—there remained nothing to beguile the hours but the perpetual stitch—stitch—stitch of an industriously-disposed sempstress; and the two women used to sit throughout the long afternoons with their work-baskets before them, talking a little now and then of the most commonplace matters, but for the greater part of their time silent. Sometimes, when the heavy burden of Mrs. Tadman's society, and the clicking of needles and snipping of scissors, grew almost unendurable, Ellen would run out of the house for a brief airing in the garden, and walk briskly to and fro along the narrow pathway between the potatoes and cab-

bages, thinking of her dismal life, and of the old days at the Grange when she had been full of gaiety and hope. There was not perhaps much outward difference in the two lives. In her father's house she had worked as hard as she worked now; but she had been free in those days, and the unknown future all before her, with its chances of happiness. Now, she felt like some captive who paces the narrow bounds of his prison-yard, without hope of release or respite, except in death.

This particular spring day had begun brightly, the morning had been sunny and even warm; but now, as the afternoon wore away, there were dark clouds, with a rising wind and a sharp gusty shower every now and then. Ellen took a solitary turn in the garden between the showers. It was market-day; Stephen Whitelaw was not expected home till tea-time, and the meal was to be eaten at a later hour than usual.

The rain increased as the time for the farmer's return drew nearer. He had gone out in the morning without his overcoat, Mrs. Tadman remembered, and was likely to get wet through on his way home, unless he should have borrowed

some extra covering at Malsham. His temper, which of late had been generally at its worst, would hardly be improved by this annoyance.

There was a very substantial meal waiting for him: a ponderous joint of cold roast beef, a dish of ham and eggs preparing in the kitchen, with an agreeable frizzling sound, a pile of hot buttered cakes kept hot upon the oven top; but there was no fire in the parlour, and the room looked a little cheerless in spite of the well-spread table. They had discontinued fires for about a fortnight, at Mr. Whitelaw's command. He didn't want to be ruined by his coal-merchant's bill if it *was* a chilly spring, he told his household; and at his own bidding the fireplace had been polished and garnished for the summer. But this evening was colder than any evening lately, by reason of that blusterous rising wind, which blew the rain-drops against the window-panes with as sharp a rattle as if they had been hailstones; and Mr. Whitelaw coming in presently, disconsolate and dripping, was by no means inclined to abide by his own decision about the fires.

‘Why the —— haven't you got a fire here?’ he demanded savagely.

'It was your own wish, Stephen,' answered Mrs. Tadman.

'My own fiddlesticks! Of course I didn't care to see my wood and coals burning to waste when the sun was shining enough to melt any one. But when a man comes home wet to the skin, he doesn't want to come into a room like an ice-house. Call the girl, and tell her to light a blazing fire while I go and change my clothes. Let her bring plenty of wood, and put a couple of logs on top of the coals. I'm frozen to the very bones driving home in the rain.'

Mrs. Tadman gave a plaintive sigh as she departed to obey her kinsman.

'That's just like Stephen,' she said; 'if it was you or me that wanted a fire, we might die of cold before we got leave to light one; but he never grudges anything for his own comfort!'

Martha came and lighted a fire under Mrs. Tadman's direction. That lady was inclined to look somewhat uneasily upon the operation; for the grate had been used constantly throughout a long winter, and the chimney had not been swept since last spring, whereby Mrs. Tadman was conscious of a great accumulation of soot about the

massive old brickwork and ponderous beams that spanned the wide chimney. She had sent for the Malsham sweep some weeks ago; but that necessary individual had not been able to come on the particular day she wished, and the matter had been since then neglected. She remembered this now with a guilty feeling, more especially as Stephen had demanded a blazing fire, with flaring pine-logs piled half-way up the chimney. He came back to the parlour presently, arrayed in an old suit of clothes which he kept for such occasions—an old green coat with basket buttons, and a pair of plaid trousers of an exploded shape and pattern—and looking more like a pinched and pallid scarecrow than a well-to-do farmer. Mrs. Tadman had only carried out his commands in a modified degree, and he immediately ordered the servant to put a couple of logs on the fire, and then drew the table close up to the hearth, and sat down to his tea with some appearance of satisfaction. He had had rather a good day at market, he condescended to tell his wife during the progress of the meal; prices were rising, his old hay was selling at a rate which promised well for the new crops, turnips were in brisk

demand, mangold inquired for — altogether Mr. Whitelaw confessed himself very well satisfied with the aspect of affairs.

After tea he spent his evening luxuriously, sitting close to the fire, with his slippered feet upon the fender, and drinking hot rum-and-water as a preventive of impending, or cure of incipient, cold. The rum-and-water being a novelty, something out of the usual order of his drink, appeared to have an enlivening effect upon him. He talked more than usual, and even proposed a game at cribbage with Mrs. Tadman ; a condescension which moved that matron to tears, reminding her, she said, of old times, when they had been so comfortable together, before he had taken to spend his evenings at the Grange.

‘Not that I mean any unkindness to you, Ellen,’ the doleful Tadman added, apologetically, ‘for you’ve been a good friend to me, and if there’s one merit I can lay claim to, it’s a grateful heart ; but of course, when a man marries, he never is the same to his relations as when he was single. It isn’t in human nature that he should be.’

Here Mrs. Tadman’s amiable kinsman re-

quested her to hold her jaw, and to bring the board if she was going to play, or to say as much if she wasn't. Urged by this gentle reminder, Mrs. Tadman immediately produced a somewhat dingy-looking pack of cards and a queer little old-fashioned cribbage-board.

The game lasted for an hour or so, at the end of which time the farmer threw himself back in his chair with a yawn, and pronounced that he had had enough of it. The old eight-day clock in the lobby struck ten soon after this, and the two women rose to retire, leaving Stephen to his night's libations, and not sorry to escape out of the room, which he had converted into a kind of oven or Turkish bath by means of the roaring fire he had insisted upon keeping up all the evening. He was left, therefore, with his bottle of rum about half emptied, to finish his night's entertainment after his own fashion.

Mrs. Tadman ventured a mild warning about the fire when she wished him good-night; but as she did not dare to hint that there had been any neglect in the matter of chimney-sweeping, her counsel went for very little. Mr. Whitelaw threw on another pine-log directly the two women had

left him, and addressed himself to the consumption of a fresh glass of rum-and-water.

‘There’s nothing like being on the safe side,’ he muttered to himself with an air of profound wisdom. ‘I don’t want to be laid up with the rheumatics, if I can help it.’

He finished the contents of his glass, and went softly out of the room, carrying a candle with him. He was absent about ten minutes, and then came back to resume his comfortable seat by the fire, and mixed himself another glass of grog with the air of a man who was likely to finish the bottle.

While he sat drinking in his slow sensual way, his young wife slept peacefully enough in one of the rooms above him. Early rising and industrious habits will bring sleep, even when the heart is hopeless and the mind is weary. Mrs. Whitelaw slept a tranquil dreamless sleep to-night, while Mrs. Tadman snored with a healthy regularity in a room on the opposite side of the passage.

There was a faint glimmer of dawn in the sky, a cold wet dawn, when Ellen was awakened suddenly by a sound that bewildered and alarmed

her. It was almost like the report of a pistol, she thought, as she sprang out of bed, pale and trembling.

It was not a pistol shot, however, only a handful of gravel thrown sharply against her window.

‘Stephen,’ she cried, half awake and very much frightened, ‘what was that?’ But, to her surprise, she found that her husband was not in the room.

While she sat on the edge of her bed hurrying some of her clothes on, half mechanically, and wondering what that startling sound could have been, a sudden glow of red light shone in at her window, and at the same moment her senses, which had been only half awakened before, told her that there was an atmosphere of smoke in the room.

She rushed to the door, forgetting that to open it was perhaps to admit death, and flung it open. Yes, the passage was full of smoke, and there was a strange crackling sound below.

There could be little doubt as to what had happened—the house was on fire. She remembered how repeatedly Mrs. Tadman had declared that Stephen would inevitably set the place on

fire some night or other, and how little weight she had attached to the dismal prophecy. But the matron's fears had not been groundless, it seemed. The threatened calamity had come.

‘Stephen!’ she cried, with all her might, and then flew to Mrs. Tadman's door and knocked violently. She waited for no answer, but rushed on to the room where the two women-servants slept together, and called to them loudly to get up for their lives, the house was on fire.

There were still the men in the story above to be awakened, and the smoke was every moment growing thicker. She mounted a few steps of the staircase, and called with all her strength. It was very near their time for stirring. They must hear her, surely. Suddenly she remembered an old disused alarm-bell which hung in the roof. She had seen the frayed rope belonging to it hanging in an angle of the passage. She flew to this, and pulled it vigorously till a shrill peal rang out above; and once having accomplished this, she went on, reckless of her own safety, thinking only how many there were to be saved in that house.

All this time there was no sign of her hus-

band, and a dull horror came over her with the thought that he might be perishing miserably below. There could be no doubt that the fire came from downstairs. That crackling noise had increased, and every now and then there came a sound like the breaking of glass. The red glow shining in at the front windows grew deeper and brighter. The fire had begun in the parlour, of course, where they had left Stephen Whitelaw basking in the warmth of his resinous pine-logs.

Ellen was still ringing the bell, when she heard a man's footstep coming along the passage towards her. It was not her husband, but one of the farm-servants from the upper story, an honest broad-shouldered fellow, as strong as Hercules.

‘Lord a mercy, mum, be that you?’ he cried, as he recognised the white half-dressed figure clinging to the bell-rope; ‘let me get ‘ee out o’ this; the old place ‘ll burn like so much tinder;’ and before she could object, he had taken her up in his arms as easily as if she had been a child, and was carrying her towards the principal staircase.

Here they were stopped. The flames and

smoke were mounting from the lobby below ; the man turned immediately, wasting no time by indecision, and ran to the stairs leading down to the kitchen. In this direction all was safe. There was smoke, but in a very modified degree.

‘ Robert,’ Ellen cried eagerly, when they had reached the kitchen, where all was quiet, ‘ for God’s sake, go and see what has become of your master. We left him drinking in the parlour last night. I’ve called to him again and again, but there’s been no answer.’

‘ Don’t you take on, mum ; master’s all right, I daresay. Here be the gals and Mrs. Tadman coming downstairs ; they’ll take care o’ you, while I go and look arter him. You’ve no call to be frightened. If the fire should come this way, you’ve only got to open yon door and get out into the yard. You’re safe here.’

The women were all huddled together in the kitchen by this time, half dressed, shivering, and frightened out of their wits. Ellen Whitelaw was the only one among them who displayed anything like calmness.

The men were all astir. One had run across the fields to Malsham to summon the fire-engine,

another was gone to remove some animals stabled near the house.

The noise of burning wood was rapidly increasing, the smoke came creeping under the kitchen-door presently, and, five minutes after he had left them, the farm-servant came back to say that he could find no traces of his master. The parlour was in flames. If he had been surprised by the fire in his sleep, it must needs be all over with him. The man urged his mistress to get out of the house at once; the fire was gaining ground rapidly, and it was not likely that anything he or the other men could do would stop its progress.

The women left the kitchen immediately upon this warning, by a door leading into the yard. It was broad daylight by this time; a chilly sunless morning, and a high wind sweeping across the fields and fanning the flames, which now licked the front wall of Wyncomb Farmhouse. The total destruction of the place seemed inevitable, unless help from Malsham came very quickly. The farm-servants were running to and fro with buckets of water from the yard, and flinging their contents in at the shattered windows of the front

rooms ; but this was a small means of checking the destruction. The house was old, built for the most part of wood, and there seemed little hope for it.

Ellen and the other women went round to the front of the house, and stood there, dismal figures in their scanty raiment, with woollen petticoats pinned across their shoulders, and disordered hair blown about their faces by the damp wind. They stood grouped together in utter helplessness, looking at the work of ruin with a half stupid air ; almost like the animals who had been hustled from one place of shelter to another, and were evidently lost in wonder as to the cause of their removal.

But presently, as the awful scene before them grew more familiar, the instincts of self-interest arose in each breast. Mrs. Tadman piteously bewailed the loss of her entire wardrobe, and some mysterious pocket-book which she described plaintively as her ' little all.' She dwelt dolefully upon the merits of each particular article, most especially upon a French-merino dress she had bought for Stephen's wedding, which would have lasted her a lifetime, and a Paisley shawl, the gift

of her deceased husband, which had been in her possession twenty years, and had not so much as a thin place in it.

Nor was the disconsolate matron the only one who lamented her losses. Sarah Batts, with clasped hands and distracted aspect, wept for the destruction of her 'box.'

'There was money in it,' she cried, 'money! O, don't you think the men could get to my room and save it?'

'Money!' exclaimed Mrs. Tadman sharply, aroused from the contemplation of her own woes by this avowal; 'you must have been cleverer than I took you for, Sarah Batts, to be able to save money, and yet be always bedizened with some new bit of finery, as you've been.'

'It was give to me,' Sarah answered indignantly, 'by them as had a right to give it.'

'For no good, I should think,' replied Mrs. Tadman; 'what should anybody give you money for?'

'Never you mind; it was mine. O dear, O dear! if one of the men would only get my box for me.'

She ran to intercept one of the farm-labourers,

armed with his bucket, and tried to bribe him by the promise of five shillings as a reward for the rescue of her treasures. But the man only threatened to heave the bucket of water at her if she got in his way; and Miss Batts was obliged to abandon this hope.

The fire made rapid progress meanwhile, unchecked by that ineffectual splashing of water. It had begun at the eastern end of the building, the end most remote from those disused rooms in the ivy-covered west wing; but the wind was blowing from the north-east, and the flames were spreading rapidly towards that western angle. There was little chance that any part of the house could be saved.

While Ellen Whitelaw was looking on at the work of ruin, with a sense of utter helplessness, hearing the selfish lamentations of Mrs. Tadman and Sarah Batts like voices in a dream, she was suddenly aroused from this state of torpor by a loud groan, which sounded from not very far off. It came from behind her, from the direction of the poplars. She flew to the spot, and on the ground beneath one of them she found a helpless figure lying prostrate, with an awful smoke-

blackened face—a figure and face which for some moments she did not recognise as her husband's.

She knew him at last, however, and knelt down beside him. He was groaning in an agonised manner, and had evidently been fearfully burnt before he made his escape.

‘Stephen!’ she cried. ‘O, thank God you are here. I thought you were shut up in that burning house. I called with all my might, and the men searched for you.’

‘It isn't much to be thankful for,’ gasped the farmer. ‘I don't suppose there's an hour's life in me; I'm scorched from head to foot, and one arm's helpless. I woke up all of a sudden, and found the room in a blaze. The flames had burst out of the great beam that goes across the chimney-piece. The place was all on fire, so that I couldn't reach the door anyhow; and before I could get out of the window, I was burnt like this. You'd have been burnt alive in your bed but for me. I threw up a handful of gravel at your window. It must have woke you, didn't it?’

‘Yes, yes, that was the sound that woke me; it seemed like a pistol going off. You saved my

life, Stephen. It was very good of you to remember me.'

'Yes; there's men in my place who wouldn't have thought of anybody but themselves.'

'Can I do nothing to ease you, Stephen?' asked his wife.

She had seated herself on the grass beside him, and had taken his head on her lap, supporting him gently. She was shocked to see the change the fire had made in his face, which was all blistered and distorted.

'No, nothing; till they come to carry me away somewhere. I'm all one burning pain.'

His eyes closed, and he seemed to sink into a kind of stupor. Ellen called to one of the men. They might carry him to some place of shelter surely, at once, where a doctor could be summoned, and something done for his relief. There was a humble practitioner resident at Crosber, that is to say, about two miles from Wyncomb. One of the farm-servants might take a horse and gallop across the fields to fetch this man.

Robert Dunn, the bailiff, heard her cries presently, and came to her. He was very much shocked by his master's condition, and at once

agreed to the necessity of summoning a surgeon. He proposed that they should carry Stephen Whitelaw to some stables, which lay at a safe distance from the burning house, and make up some kind of bed for him there. He ran back to dispatch one of the men to Crosber, and returned immediately with another to remove his master.

But when they tried to raise the injured man between them, he cried out to them to let him alone, they were murdering him. Let him lie where he was ; he would not be moved.

So he was allowed to lie there, with his head on his wife's lap, and his tortured body covered by a coat, which one of the men brought him. His eyes closed again, and for some time he lay without the slightest motion.

The fire was gaining ground every instant, and there was yet no sign of the engine from Malsham ; but Ellen Whitelaw scarcely heeded the work of destruction. She was thinking only of the helpless stricken creature lying with his head upon her lap ; thinking of him perhaps in this hour of his extremity with all the more compassion, because he had always been obnoxious

to her. She prayed for the rapid arrival of the surgeon, who must surely be able to give some relief to her husband's sufferings, she thought. It seemed dreadful for him to be lying like this, with no attempt made to lessen his agony.

After a long interval he lifted his scorched eyelids slowly, and looked at her with a strange dim gaze.

‘The west wing,’ he muttered; ‘is that burnt?’

‘No, Stephen, not yet; but there’s little hope they’ll save any part of the house.’

‘They must save that; the rest don’t matter,—I’m insured heavily; but they must save the west wing.’

His wife concluded from this that he had kept some of his money in one of those western rooms. The seed-room perhaps, that mysterious padlocked chamber, where she had heard the footstep. And yet she had heard him say again and again that he never kept an unnecessary shilling in the house, and that every pound he had was out at interest. But such falsehoods and contradictions are common enough amongst men of miserly habits; and Stephen Whitelaw would hardly be

so anxious about those western rooms unless something of value were hidden away there. He closed his eyes again, and lay groaning faintly for some time; then opened them suddenly with a frightened look and asked, in the same tone,

‘The west wing—is the west wing afire yet?’

‘The wind blows that way, Stephen, and the flames are spreading. I don’t think they could save it—not if the engine was to come this minute.’

‘But I tell you they must!’ cried Stephen Whitelaw. ‘If they don’t, it’ll be murder—cold-blooded murder. O, my God, I never thought there was much harm in the business—and it paid me well—but it’s weighed me down like a load of lead, and made me drink more to drown thought. But if it should come to this—Don’t you understand? Don’t sit staring at me like that. If the fire gets to the west wing, it will be murder. There’s some one there—some one locked up—that won’t be able to stir unless they get her out.’

‘Some one locked up in the west wing! Are you mad, Stephen?’

‘It’s the truth. I wouldn’t do it again—no,

not for twice the money. Let them get her out somehow. They can do it, if they look sharp.'

That unforgotten footstep and equally unforgotten scream flashed into Mrs. Whitelaw's mind with these words of her husband's. Some one shut up there; yes, that was the solution of the mystery that had puzzled and tormented her so long. That cry of anguish was no supernatural echo of past suffering, but the despairing shriek of some victim of modern cruelty. A poor relation of Stephen's perhaps—a helpless mindless creature, whose infirmities had been thus hidden from the world. Such things have been too cruelly common in our fair free country.

Ellen laid her husband's head gently down upon the grass and sprang to her feet.

'In which room?' she cried. But there was no answer. The man lay with closed eyes—dying perhaps—but she could do nothing for him till medical help came. The rescue of that unknown captive was a more urgent duty.

She was running towards the burning house, when she heard a horse galloping on the road leading from the gate. She stopped, hoping that this was the arrival of the doctor; but a familiar

voice called to her, and in another minute her father had dismounted and was close at her side.

‘Thank God you’re safe, lass !’ he exclaimed, with some warmer touch of paternal feeling than he was accustomed to exhibit. ‘Our men saw the fire when they were going to their work, and I came across directly. Where’s Steph ?’

‘Under the trees yonder, very much hurt ; I’m afraid fatally. But there’s nothing we can do for him till the doctor comes. There’s some one in still greater danger, father. For God’s sake, help us to save her—some one shut up yonder, in a room at that end of the house.’

‘Some one shut up ! One of the servants, do you mean ?’

‘No, no, no. Some one who has been kept shut up there—hidden—ever so long. Stephen told me just now. O, father, for pity’s sake, try to save her !’

‘Nonsense, lass. Your husband’s brain must have been wandering. Who should be shut up there, and you live in the house and not know it ? Why should Stephen hide any one in his house ? What motive could he have for such a thing ? It isn’t possible.’

‘I tell you, father, it is true. There was no mistaking Stephen’s words just now; and, besides that, I’ve heard noises that might have told me as much, only I thought the house was haunted. I tell you there is some one—some one who’ll be burnt alive if we’re not quick—and every moment’s precious. Won’t you try to save her?’

‘Of course I will. Only I don’t want to risk my life for a fancy. Is there a ladder anywhere?’

‘Yes, yes. The men have ladders.’

‘And where’s this room where you say the woman is shut-up?’

‘At that corner of the house,’ answered Ellen, pointing. ‘There’s a door at the end of the passage, but no window looking this way. There’s only one, and that’s over the wood-yard.’

‘Then it would be easiest to get in that way?’

‘No, no, father. The wood’s all piled up above the window. It would take such a time to move it.’

‘Never mind that. Anything’s better than the risk of going into yonder house. Besides, the room’s locked, you say. Have you got the key?’

‘No; but I could get it from Stephen, I dare-say.’

‘We won’t wait for you to try. We’ll begin at the wood-yard.’

‘Take Robert Dunn with you, father. He’s a good brave fellow.’

‘Yes, I’ll take Dunn.’

The bailiff hurried away to the wood-yard, accompanied by Dunn and another man carrying a tall ladder. The farm-servants had ceased from their futile efforts at quenching the fire by this time. It was a labour too hopeless to continue. The flames had spread to the west wing. The ivy was already crackling, as the blaze crept over it. Happily that shut-up room was at the extreme end of the building, the point to which the flames must come last. And here, just at the moment when the work of devastation was almost accomplished, came the Malsham fire-engine rattling along gaily through the dewy morning, and the Malsham amateur fire-brigade, a very juvenile corps as yet, eager to cover itself with laurels, but more careful in the adjustment of its costume than was quite consistent with the desperate nature of its duty. Here came the

brigade, in time to do something at any rate, and the engine soon began to play briskly upon the western wing.

Ellen Whitelaw was in the wood-yard, watching the work going on there with intense anxiety. The removal of the wood-pile seemed a slow business, well as the three men performed their work, flinging down great crashing piles of wood one after another without a moment's pause. They were now joined by the Malsham fire-escape men, who had got wind of some one to be rescued from this part of the house, and were eager to exhibit the capabilities of a new fire-escape, started, with much hubbub and glorification, after an awful fire had ravaged Malsham High-street, and half-a-dozen lives had been wasted because the old fire-escape was out of order and useless.

‘We don’t want the fire-escape,’ cried Mr. Carley as the tall machine was wheeled into the yard. ‘The room we want to get at isn’t ten feet from the ground. You can give us a hand with this wood if you like. That’s all we want.’

The men clambered on to the wood-pile. It was getting visibly lower by this time, and the

top of the window was to be seen. Ellen watched with breathless anxiety, forgetting that her husband might be dying under the poplars. He was not alone there ; she had sent Mrs. Tadman to watch him.

Only a few minutes more and the window was cleared. A pale face could be dimly seen peering out through the dusty glass. William Carley tried to open the lattice, but it was secured tightly within. One of the firemen leapt forward upon his failure, and shattered every pane of glass and every inch of the leaden frame with a couple of blows from his axe, and then the bailiff clambered into the room.

He was hidden from those below about five minutes, and then emerged from the window, somehow or other, carrying a burden, and came struggling across the wood to the ladder by which he and the rest had mounted. The burden which he carried was a woman's figure, with the face hidden by his large woollen neckerchief. Ellen gave a cry of horror. The woman must surely be dead, or why should he have taken such pains to cover her face ?

He brought his burden down the ladder very

carefully, and gave the lifeless figure into Ellen's arms.

‘Help me to carry her away yonder, while Robert gets the cart ready,’ he said to his daughter; ‘she’s fainted.’ And then he added in a whisper, ‘For God’s sake, don’t let any one see her face! it’s Mrs. Holbrook.’

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE FIRE.

YES, it was Marian. She whom Gilbert Fenton had sought so long and patiently, with doubt and anguish in his heart; she whose double John Saltram had followed across the Atlantic, had been within easy reach of them all the time, hidden away in that dreary old farmhouse, the innocent victim of Percival Nowell's treachery, and Stephen Whitelaw's greed of gain. The whole story was told by and by, when the master of Wyncomb Farm lay dying.

William Carley and his daughter took her to the Grange as soon as the farmer's spring cart was ready to convey her thither. It was all done very quickly, and none of the farm-servants saw her face. Even if they had done so, it is more than doubtful that they would have recognised her, so pale a shadow of her former self

had she become during that long dreary imprisonment ; the face wan and wasted, with a strange sharpened look about the features which was like the aspect of death ; all the brightness and colour vanished out of the soft brown hair ; an ashen pallor upon her beauty, that made her seem like a creature risen from the grave.

They lifted her into the cart, still insensible, and seated her there, wrapped in an old horse-cloth, with her head resting on Mrs. Whitelaw's shoulder ; and so they drove slowly away. It was only when they had gone some little distance from the farm, that the fresh morning air revived her, and she opened her eyes and looked about her, wildly at first, and with a faint shuddering sigh.

Then, after a few moments, full consciousness came back to her, and a sudden cry of rapture broke from the pale lips.

‘ O God ! ’ she exclaimed, ‘ am I set free ? ’

‘ Yes, dear Mrs. Holbrook, you are free, never again to go back to that cruel place. O, to think that you should be used so, and I so near ! ’

Marian lifted her head from Ellen's shoulder, and recognised her with a second cry of delight.

‘Ellen, is it you? Then I am safe; I must be safe with you.’

‘Safe! yes, dear. I would die sooner than any harm should come to you again. Who could have brought this cruelty about? who could have shut you up in that room?’

‘My father,’ Marian answered with a shudder. ‘He wanted my money, I suppose; and instead of killing me, he shut me up in that place.’

She said no more just then, being too weak to say much; and Ellen, who was employed in soothing and comforting her, did not want her to talk. It was afterwards, when she had been established in her old rooms at the Grange, and had taken a little breakfast, that she told Ellen something more about her captivity.

‘O, Ellen, if I were to tell you what I have suffered! But no, there are no words can tell that. It’s not that they ill-used me. The girl who waited on me brought me good food, and even tried to make me comfortable in her rough way; but to sit there day after day, Ellen, alone, with only a dim light from the top of the window above the wood-stack; to sit there wondering about

my husband, whether he was searching for me still, and would ever find me, or whether, as was more likely, he had given me up for dead. Think of me, Ellen, if you can, sitting there for weeks and months in my despair, trying to reckon the days sometimes by the aid of some old newspaper which the girl brought me now and then, at other times losing count of them altogether.'

' Dear Mrs. Holbrook, I can't understand it even yet. Tell me how it all came about—how they ever lured you into that place.'

' It was easy enough, Ellen; I wasn't conscious when they took me there. The story is very short. You remember that day when you left the Grange, how happy I was, looking forward to my husband's return, and thinking of the good news I had to tell him. We were to be rich, and our lives free and peaceful henceforward; and I had seen him suffer so much for the want of money. It was the morning after you left when the post brought me a letter from my father—a letter with the Malsham post-mark. I had seen him in town, as you know, and was scarcely surprised that he should write to me. But I was surprised to find him so near me, and the con-

tents of the letter were very perplexing. My father entreated me to meet him on the river-side pathway, between Malsham station and this house. He had been informed of my habits, he said, and that I was accustomed to walk there. That was curious, when, so far as I knew, he had never been near this place ; but I hardly thought about the strangeness of it then. He begged me so earnestly to see him ; it was a matter of life or death, he said. What could I do, Nelly ? He was my father, and I felt that I owed him some duty. I could not refuse to see him ; and if he had some personal objection to coming here, it seemed a small thing for me to take the trouble to go and meet him. I could but hear what he had to say.'

‘I wish to heaven I had been here !’ exclaimed Ellen ; ‘you shouldn’t have gone alone, if I had known anything about it.’

‘I think, if you had been here, I should have told you about the letter, for it puzzled me a good deal, and I knew how well I could trust you. But you were away ; and my father’s request was so urgent—the hour was named—I could do nothing but accede to it. So I went, leaving no

message for you or for my husband, feeling so sure of my return within an hour or two.'

' And you found your father waiting for you ?'

' Yes, on the river-bank, within a short distance of Mr. Whitelaw's house. He began by congratulating me on the change in my prospects, —I was a rich woman, he said. And then he went on to vilify my husband in such hateful words, Ellen ; telling me that I had married a notorious scoundrel and profligate, and that he could produce ample evidence of what he affirmed ; and all this with a pretended pity for my weakness and ignorance of the world. I laughed his shameful slanders to scorn, and told him that I knew my husband too thoroughly to be alarmed even for a moment by such groundless charges. He still affected to compassionate me as the weakest and most credulous of women, and then came to a proposal which he said he had travelled to Hampshire on purpose to make to me. It was, that I should leave my husband, and place myself under his protection ; that I should go to America with him when he returned there, and so preserve my fortune from the clutches of a villain. " My fortune ?" I said ; " yes, I see that it is

that alone you are thinking of. How can you suppose me so blind as not to understand that? You had better be candid with me, and say frankly what you want. I have no doubt my husband will allow me to make any reasonable sacrifice in your favour.”

‘ What did he say to that ?’

‘ He laughed bitterly at my offer. “ Your husband !” he said. “ I am not likely to see the colour of my father’s money, if you are to be governed by him.” “ You do him a great wrong,” I answered. “ I am sure that he will act generously, and I shall be governed by him.”’

‘ He was very angry, I suppose ?’

‘ No doubt of it ; but for some time he contrived to suppress all appearance of anger, and urged me to believe his statements about my husband, and to accept his offer of a home and protection with him. I cannot tell you how plausible his words were—what an appearance of affection and interest in my welfare he put on. Then, finding me firm, he changed his tone, and there were hidden threats mixed with his entreaties. It would be a bad thing for me if I refused to go with him, he said ; I would have cause to repent

my folly for the rest of my life. He said a great deal, using every argument it is possible to imagine; and there was always the same threatening undertone. He could not move me in the least, as you may fancy, Nell. I told him that nothing upon earth would induce me to leave my husband, or to think ill of him. And in this manner we walked up and down for nearly two hours, till I began to feel very tired and faint. My father saw this, and when we came within sight of Wyncomb Farmhouse, proposed that I should go in and rest, and take a glass of milk or some kind of refreshment. I was surprised at this proposal, and asked him if he knew the people of the house. He said yes, he knew something of Mr. Whitelaw; he had met him the night before in the coffee-room of the inn at Malsham.'

‘Then your father had slept at Malsham the night before?’

‘Evidently. His letter to me had been posted at Malsham, you know. I asked him how long he had been in this part of the country, and he rather evaded the question. Not long, he said; and he had come down here only to see me. At first I refused to go into Mr. Whitelaw’s house,

being only anxious to get home as quickly as possible. But my father seemed offended by this. I wanted to get rid of him, he said, although this was likely to be our last interview—the very last time in his life that he would ever see me, perhaps. I could not surely grudge him half an hour more of my company. I could scarcely go on refusing after this; and I really felt so tired and faint, that I doubted my capability of walking back to this house without resting. So I said yes, and we went into Wyncomb Farmhouse. The door was opened by a girl when my father knocked. There was no one at home, she told him; but we were quite welcome to sit down in the parlour, and she would bring me a glass of fresh milk and a slice of bread-and-butter.

‘ The house had a strange empty look, I thought. There was none of the life or bustle one expects to see at a farm; all was silent as the grave. The gloom and quietness of the place chilled me somehow. There was a fire burning in the parlour, and my father made me sit down very close to it, and I think the heat increased that faintness which I had felt when I came into the house.

‘ Again and again he urged his first demand, seeming as if he would wear down all opposition by persistence. I was quite firm ; but the effect of all this argument was very wearisome, and I began to feel really ill.

‘ I think I must have been on the point of fainting, when the door was opened suddenly, and Mr. Whitelaw came in. In the next moment, while the room was spinning round before my eyes, and that dreadful giddiness that comes before a dead faint was growing worse, my father snatched me up in his arms, and threw a hand-kerchief over my face. I had just sense enough to know that there was chloroform upon it, and that was all. When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on a narrow bed, in a dimly-lighted room, with a small fire burning in a rusty grate in one corner, and some tea-things, with a plate of cold meat, on a table near it. There was a scrap of paper on this table, with a few lines scrawled upon it in pencil, in my father’s hand : “ You have had your choice, either to share a prosperous life with me, or to be shut up like a mad woman. You had better make yourself as comfortable as you can, since you have no hope

of escape till it suits my purpose to have you set free. Good care will be taken of you. You must have been a fool to suppose that I would submit to the injustice of J. N.'s will."

‘For a long time I sat like some stupid bewildered creature, going over these words again and again, as if I had no power to understand them. It was very long before I could believe that my father meant to shut me up in that room for an indefinite time—for the rest of my life, perhaps. But little by little I came to believe this, and to feel nothing but a blank despair. O, Nelly, I dare not dwell upon that time ! I suffered too much. God has been very merciful to me in sparing me my mind ; for there were times when I believe I was quite mad. I could pray sometimes, but not always. I have spent whole days in prayer, almost as if I fancied that I could weary out my God with supplications.’

‘And Stephen, did you see him ?’

‘Yes, now and then—once in several days, in a week perhaps. He used to come, like the master of a madhouse visiting his patients, to see that I was comfortable, he said.* At first I used to appeal to him to set me free—kneeling at his feet,

promising any sacrifice of my fortune for him or for my father, if they would release me. But it was no use. He was as hard as a rock ; and at last I felt that it was useless, and used to see him come and go with hopeless apathy. No, Ellen, there are no words can describe what I suffered. I appealed to the girl who waited on me daily, but who came only once a-day, and always after dark. I might as well have appealed to the four walls of my room ; the girl was utterly stolid. She brought me everything I was likely to want from day to day, and gave me ample means of replenishing my fire, and told me that I ought to make myself comfortable. I had a much better life than any one in the workhouse, she said ; and I must be very wicked if I complained. I believe she really thought I was a harmless madwoman, and that her master had a right to shut me up in that room. One night, after I had been there for a time that seemed like eternity, my father came—'

‘What !’ cried Ellen Whitelaw, ‘the stranger ! I understand. That man was your father ; he came to see you that night ; and as he was leaving you, you gave that dreadful shriek we heard down-

stairs. O, if I had known the truth—if I had only known !'

' *You heard me, Ellen ? You were there ?*' Marian exclaimed, surprised. She was, as yet, entirely ignorant of Ellen's marriage, and had been too much bewildered by the suddenness of her escape to wonder how the bailiff's daughter had happened to be so near at hand in that hour of deadly peril.

' Yes, yes, dear Mrs. Holbrook ; I was there, and I did not help you. But never mind that now ; tell me the rest of your story ; tell me how your father acted that night.'

' He was with me alone for about ten minutes ; he came to give me a last chance, he said. If I liked to leave my husband for ever, and go to America with him, I might do so ; but before he let me out of that place, he must have my solemn oath that I would make no attempt to see my husband ; that I would never again communicate with any one I had known up to that time ; that I would begin a new life, with him, my father, for my sole protector. I had had some experience of the result of opposing him, he said, and he now expected to find me reasonable.

‘ You can imagine my answer, Ellen. I would do anything, sacrifice anything, except my fidelity to my husband. Heaven knows I would have given twenty years of my life to escape from that dismal place, with the mere chance of being able to get back to my husband ; but I would not take a false oath ; I could not perjure myself, as that man would have made me perjure myself, in order to win my release. I knelt at his feet, and clung about him, beseeching him with all the power I had to set me free ; but he was harder than iron. Just at the end, when he had the door open, and was leaving me, telling me that I had lost my last chance, and would never see him again, I clung about him with one wild desperate cry. He flung me back into the room violently, and shut the door in my face. I fancied afterwards that that cry must have been heard, and that, if there had been any creature in the house inclined to help me, there would have come an end to my sufferings. But the time passed, and there was no change ; only the long dreary days, the wretched sleepless nights.’

This was all. There were details of her sufferings which Marian told her faithful friend by

and by, when her mind was calmer, and they had leisure for tranquil talk ; but the story was all told ; and Marian lay down to rest in the familiar room, unspeakably grateful to God for her rescue, and only eager that her husband should be informed of her safety. She had not yet been told that he had crossed the Atlantic in search of her, deluded by a false scent. Ellen feared to tell her this at first ; and she had taken it for granted that John Saltram was still in London. It was easy to defer any explanation just yet, on account of Marian's weakness. The exertion of telling the brief story of her sufferings had left her prostrate ; and she was fain to obey her friendly nurse.

‘ We will talk about everything, and arrange everything, by and by, dear Mrs. Holbrook,’ Ellen said resolutely ; ‘ but for the present you *must* rest, and you must take everything that I bring you, and be very good.’

And with that she kissed and left her, to perform another and less agreeable duty—the duty of attendance by her husband's sick-bed.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. WHITELAW MAKES HIS WILL.

THEY had carried Stephen Whitelaw to the Grange; and he lay a helpless creature, beyond hope of recovery, in one of the roomy old-fashioned bed-chambers.

The humble Crosber surgeon had done his best, and had done it skilfully, being a man of large experience amongst a lowly class of sufferers; and to the aid of the Crosber surgeon had come a more prosperous practitioner from Malsham, who had driven over in his own phaeton; but between them both they could make nothing of Stephen Whitelaw. His race was run. He had been severely burnt; and if his actual injuries were not enough to kill him, there was little chance that he could survive the shock which his system had received. He might linger a little; might hold out longer than they expected; but his life was a question of hours.

The doomed man had seemed from the first to have a conviction of the truth, and appeared in no manner surprised when, in answer to his questions, the Malsham doctor admitted that his case was fatal, and suggested that, if he had anything to do in the adjustment of his affairs, he could scarcely do it too soon. At this Mr. Whitelaw groaned aloud. If he could in any manner have adjusted his affairs so as to take his money with him, the suggestion might have seemed sensible enough; but, that being impracticable, it was the merest futility. He had never made a will; it cost him too much anguish to give away his money even on paper. And now it was virtually necessary that he should do so, or else, perhaps, his wealth would, by some occult process, be seized upon by the crown—a power which he had been accustomed to regard in the abstract with an antagonistic feeling, as being the root of queen's taxes. To leave all to his wife, with some slight pension to Mrs. Tadman, seemed the most obvious course. He had married for love, and the wife of his choice had been very dutiful and submissive. What more could he have demanded from her? and why

should he grudge her the inheritance of his wealth? Well, he would not have grudged it to her, perhaps, since some one must have it, if it had not been for that aggravating conviction that she would marry again, and that the man she preferred to him would riot in the possession of his hardly-earned riches. She would marry Frank Randall; and between them they would mismanage, and ultimately ruin, the farm. He remembered the cost of the manure he had put upon his fields that year, and regretted that useless outlay. It was a hard thing to have enriched his land only that others might profit by the produce.

‘And if I’ve laid down a yard of drain-pipes since last year, I’ve laid down a dozen mile. There’s not a bit of swampy ground or a patch of sour grass on the farm,’ he thought bitterly.

He lay for some hours deliberating as to what he should do. Death was near, but not so very close to him just yet. He had time to think. No, come what might, he would not leave the bulk of his property to fall into the keeping of Frank Randall.

He remembered that there were charitable institutions, to which a man, not wishing to enrich

an ungrateful race, might bequeath his money, and obtain some credit for himself thereby, which no man could expect from his own relations. There was an infirmary at Malsham, rather a juvenile institution as yet, in aid whereof Mr. Whitelaw had often been plagued for subscriptions, reluctantly doling out half-a-guinea now and then, more often refusing to contribute anything. He had never thought of this place in his life before; but the image of it came into his mind now, as he had seen it on market-days for the last four years—a bran new red-brick building in Malsham High-street. He thought how his name would look, cut in large letters on a stone tablet on the face of that edifice. It would be something to get for his money; a very poor and paltry something, compared with the delight of possession, but just a little better than nothing.

He lay for some time pondering upon this, with that image of the stone tablet before his eyes, setting forth that the new wing of this institution had been erected at the desire of the late Stephen Whitelaw, Esq., of Wynecomb Farm, who had bequeathed a sum of money to the in-

firmary for that purpose, whereby two new wards had, in memory of that respected benefactor, been entitled the Whitelaw wards—or something to the like effect. He composed a great many versions of the inscription as he lay there, tolerably easy as to his bodily feelings, and chiefly anxious concerning the disposal of the money; but, being unaccustomed to the task of composition, he found it more difficult than he could have supposed to set forth his own glory in a concise form of words. But the tablet would be there, of course, the very centre and keystone of the building, as it were; indeed, Mr. Whitelaw resolved to make his bequest contingent upon the fulfilment of this desire. Later in the evening he told William Carley that he had made up his mind about his will, and would be glad to see Mr. Pivott, of Malsham, rival solicitor to Mr. Randall, of the same town, as soon as that gentleman could be summoned to his bedside.

The bailiff seemed surprised at this request.

‘Why, surely, Steph, you can’t want a lawyer mixed up in the business!’ he said. ‘Those sort of chaps only live by making work for one another. You know how to make your will well

enough, old fellow, without any attorney's aforesaid and hereinafters. Half a sheet of paper and a couple of sentences would do it, I should think; the fewer words the better.'

'I'd rather have Pivott, and do it in a regular manner,' Mr. Whitelaw answered quietly. 'I remember, in a forgery case that was in the papers the other day, how the judge said of the deceased testator, that, being a lawyer, he was too wise to make his own will. Yes, I'd rather see Pivott, if you'll send for him, Carley. It's always best to be on the safe side. I don't want my money wasted in a chancery suit when I'm lying in my grave.'

William Carley tried to argue the matter with his son-in-law; but the attempt was quite useless. Mr. Whitelaw had always been the most obstinate of men—and lying on his bed, maimed and helpless, was no more to be moved from his resolve than if he had been a Roman gladiator who had just trained himself for an encounter with lions. So the bailiff was compelled to obey him, unwillingly enough, and dispatched one of the men to Malsham in quest of Mr. Pivott the attorney.

The practitioner came to the Grange as fast as his horse could carry him. Every one in Malsham knew by this time that Stephen Whitelaw was a doomed man; and Mr. Pivott felt that this was a matter of life and death. He was an eminently respectable man, plump and dapper, with a rosy smooth-shaven face, and an air of honesty that made the law seem quite a pleasant thing. He was speedily seated by Mr. Whitelaw's bed, with a pair of candles and writing materials upon a little table before him, ready to obey his client's behests, and with the self-possessed aspect of a man to whom a last will and testament involving the disposal of a million or so would have been only an every-day piece of practice.

William Carley had shown himself very civil and obliging in providing for the lawyer's comfort, and having done so, now took up his stand by the fire-place, evidently intending to remain as a spectator of the business. But an uneasy glance which the patient cast from time to time in the direction of his father-in-law convinced Mr. Pivott that he wanted that gentleman to be got rid of before business began.

‘I think, Mr. Carley, it would be as well for

our poor friend and I to be alone,' he said in his most courteous accents.

'Fiddlesticks!' exclaimed the bailiff contemptuously. 'It isn't likely that Stephen can have any secrets from his wife's father. I'm in nobody's way, I'm sure, and I'm not going to put my spoke in the wheel, let him leave his money how he may.'

'Very likely not, my dear sir. Indeed, I am sure you would respect our poor friend's wishes, even if they were to take a form unpleasing to yourself, which is far from likely. But still it may be as well for Mr. Whitelaw and myself to be alone. In cases of this kind the patient is apt to be nervous, and the business is done more expeditiously if there is no third party present. So, my dear Mr. Carley, if you have *no* objection—'

'Steph,' said the bailiff abruptly, 'do *you* want me out of the room? Say the word, if you do.'

The patient writhed, hesitated, and then replied with some confusion,

'If it's all the same to you, William Carley, I think I'd sooner be alone with Mr. Pivott.'

And here the polite attorney, having opened the door with his own hands, bowed the bailiff out; and, to his extreme mortification, William Carley found himself on the outside of his son-in-law's room, before he had time to make any farther remonstrance.

He went downstairs, and paced the wainscoted parlour in a very savage frame of mind.

‘There's some kind of devil's work hatching up there,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Why should he want me out of the room? He wouldn't, if he was going to leave all his money to Ellen, as he ought to leave it. Who else is there to get it? Not that old mother Tadman, surely. She's an artful old harridan; and if my girl had not been a fool, she'd have got rid of her out of hand when she married. Sure to goodness *she* can never stand between Stephen and his wife. And who else is there? No one that I know of; no one. Stephen wouldn't have kept any secret all these years from the folks he's lived amongst. It isn't likely. He *must* leave it all to his wife, except a hundred or so, perhaps, to mother Tadman; and it was nothing but his natural closeness that made him want me out of the way.’

And at this stage of his reflections, Mr. Carley opened a cupboard near the fire-place and brought therefrom a case-bottle, from the contents of which he found farther solace. It was about half an hour after this that he was summoned by a call from the lawyer, who was standing on the broad landing-place at the top of the stairs with a candle in his hand, when the bailiff emerged from the parlour.

‘If you’ll step up here, and bring one of your men with you, I shall be obliged, Mr. Carley,’ the attorney said, looking over the banisters; ‘I want you to witness your son-in-law’s will.’

Mr. Carley’s spirits rose a little at this. He was not much versed in the ways of lawyers, and had a notion that Mr. Pivott would read the will to him, perhaps, before he signed it. It flashed upon him presently that a legatee could not witness a will in which he was interested. It was obvious, therefore, that Stephen had left *him* nothing. Well, he had scarcely expected anything. If his daughter inherited all, it would be pretty much the same thing; she would act generously, of course.

He went into the kitchen, where the head

man, who had been retained on the premises to act as special messenger in this time of need, was sitting in the chimney-corner smoking a comfortable pipe after his walk to and from Malsham.

‘ You’re wanted upstairs a minute, Joe,’ he said; and the two went clumping up the wide old oaken staircase.

The witnessing of the will was a very brief business. Mr. Pivott did not offer to throw any light upon its contents, nor was the bailiff, sharp-sighted as he might be, able to seize upon so much as one paragraph or line of the document during the process of attaching his signature thereto.

When the ceremony was concluded, Stephen Whitelaw sank back upon his pillow with an air of satisfaction.

‘ I don’t think I could have done any better,’ he murmured. ‘ It’s a hard thing for a man of my age to leave everything behind him; but I don’t see that I could have done better.’

‘ You have done that, my dear sir, which might afford comfort to any death-bed,’ said the lawyer solemnly.

He folded the will, and put it into his pocket.

‘Our friend desires me to take charge of this document,’ he said to William Carley. ‘You will have no reason to complain, on your daughter’s account, when you become familiar with its contents. She has been fairly treated—I may say very fairly treated.’

The bailiff did not much relish the tone of this assurance. Fair treatment might mean very little.

‘I hope she has been well treated,’ he answered in a surly manner. ‘She’s been a good wife to Stephen Whitelaw, and would continue so to be if he was to live twenty years longer. When a pretty young woman marries a man twice her age, she’s a right to expect handsome treatment, Mr. Pivott. It can’t be too handsome for justice, in my opinion.’

The solicitor gave a little gentle sigh.

‘As an interested party, Mr. Carley,’ he said, ‘your opinion is not as valuable as it might be under other circumstances. However, I don’t think your daughter will complain, and I am sure the world will applaud what our poor friend has done—of his own accord, mind, Mr. Carley, wholly and solely of his own spontaneous desire. It is

a thing that I should only have been too proud to suggest; but the responsibility of such a suggestion is one which I could never have taken upon myself. It would have been out of my province, indeed. You will be kind enough to remember this by and by, my dear sir.'

The bailiff was puzzled, and showed Mr. Pivott to the door with a moody countenance.

'I thought there was some devil's work,' he muttered to himself, as he watched the lawyer mount his stiff brown cob and ride away into the night; 'but what does it all mean? and what has Stephen Whitelaw done with his money? We shall know that pretty soon, anyhow. He can't last long.'

CHAPTER XIV.

ELLEN REGAINS HER LIBERTY.

STEPHEN WHITELAW lingered for two days and two nights, and at the expiration of that time departed this life, making a very decent end of it, and troubled by no thought that his existence had been an unworthy one.

Before he died, he told his wife something of how he had been tempted into the doing of that foul deed whereof Marian Saltram had been the victim. Those two were alone together the day before he died, when Stephen, of his own free will, made the following statement :

‘ It was Mrs. Holbrook’s father, you see,’ he said, in a plausible tone, ‘ that put it to me, how he might want his daughter taken care of for a time—it might be a short time, or it might be rather a longish time, according to how circumstances should work out. We’d met once before at

the King's Arms at Malsham, where Mr. Nowell was staying, and where I went in of an evening, once in a way, after market; and he'd made pretty free with me, and asked me a good many questions about myself, and told me a good bit about himself, in a friendly way. He told me how his daughter had gone against him, and was likely to go against him, and how some property that ought in common justice to have been left to him, had been left to her. He was going to give her a fair chance, he said, if she liked to leave her husband, who was a scheming scoundrel, and obey him. She might have a happy home with him, if she was reasonable. If not, he should use his authority as a father.

‘ He came to see me at Wyncomb next day—dropped in unawares like, when mother Tadman was out of the way—not that I had asked him, you see. He seemed to be quite taken with the place, and made me show him all over the house; and then he took a glass of something, and sat and talked a bit, and went away, without having said a word about his daughter. But before he went he made me promise that I'd go and see him at the King's Arms that night.

‘ Well, you see, Nell, as he seemed to have taken a fancy to me, as you may say, and had told me he could put me up to making more of my money, and had altogether been uncommonly pleasant, I didn’t care to say no, and I went. I was rather taken aback at the King’s Arms when they showed me to a private room, because I’d met Mr. Nowell before in the commercial ; however, there he was, sitting in front of a blazing fire, and with a couple of decanters of wine upon the table.

‘ He was very civil, couldn’t have been more friendly, and we talked and talked ; he was always harping on his daughter ; till at last he came out with what he wanted. Would I give her house-room for a bit, just to keep her out of the way of her husband and suchlike designing people, supposing she should turn obstinate and refuse to go abroad with him ? “ You’ve a rare old roomy place,” he said. “ I saw some rooms upstairs at the end of a long passage which don’t seem to have been used for years. You might keep my lady in one of those ; and that fine husband of hers would be as puzzled where to find her as if she was in the centre of Africa.

It would be a very easy thing to do," he said; "and it would be only friendly in you to do it."

"O, Stephen," cried his wife reproachfully, "how could you ever consent to such a wicked thing!"

"I don't know about the wickedness of it," Mr. Whitelaw responded, with rather a sullen air; "a daughter is bound to obey her father, isn't she? and if she don't, I should think he had the power to do what he liked with her. That's how I should look at it, if I was a father. It's all very well to talk, you see, Nell, but you don't know the arguments such a man as that can bring to bear. I didn't want to do it; I was against it from the first. It was a dangerous business, and might bring me into trouble. But that man bore down upon me to that extent that he made me promise anything; and when I went home that night, it was with the understanding that I was to fit-up a room—there was a double door to be put up to shut out sound, and a deal more—ready for Mrs. Holbrook, in case her father wanted to get her out of the way for a bit."

"He promised to pay you, of course?" Ellen

said, not quite able to conceal the contempt and aversion which this confession of her husband's inspired.

‘ Well, yes, a man doesn't put himself in jeopardy like that for nothing. He was to give me a certain sum of money down the first night that Mrs. Holbrook slept in my house; and another sum of money before he went to America, and an annual sum for continuing to take care of her, if he wanted to keep her quiet permanently, as he might. Altogether it would be a very profitable business, he told me, and I ought to consider myself uncommonly lucky to get such a chance. As to the kindness or unkindness of the matter, it was better than shutting her up in a lunatic asylum, he said; and he might have to do that, if I refused to take her. She was very weak in her head, he said, and the doctors would throw no difficulty in his way, if he wanted to put her into a madhouse.’

‘ But you must have known that was a lie! ’ exclaimed Ellen indignantly. ‘ You had seen and talked to her; you must have known that Mrs. Holbrook was as sane as you or I.’

‘ I couldn't be supposed to know better than

her own father,' answered Mr. Whitelaw, in an injured tone; 'he had a right to know best. However, it's no use arguing about it now. He had such a power over me that I couldn't go against him; so I gave in, and Mrs. Holbrook came to Wyncomb. She was to be treated kindly and made comfortable, her father said; that was agreed between us; and she has been treated kindly and made comfortable. I had to trust some one to wait upon her, and when Mr. Nowell saw the two girls he chose Sarah Batts. "That girl will do anything for money," he said; "she's stupid, but she's wise enough to know her own interest, and she'll hold her tongue." So I trusted Sarah Batts, and I had to pay her pretty stiffly to keep the secret; but she was a rare one to do the work, and she went about it as quiet as a mouse. Not even mother Tadman ever suspected her.'

'It was a wicked piece of business—wicked from first to last,' said Ellen. 'I can't bear to hear about it.'

And then, remembering that the sinner was so near his end, and that this voluntary confession of his was in some manner a sign of repentance,

she felt some compunction, and spoke to him in a softer tone.

‘Still I’m grateful to you for telling me the truth at last, Stephen,’ she said; ‘and, thank God, there’s no harm done that need last for ever. Thank God that dear young lady did not lose her life, shut up a prisoner in that miserable room, as she might have done.’

‘She had her victuals regular,’ observed Mr. Whitelaw, ‘and the best.’

‘Eating and drinking won’t keep any one alive, if their heart’s breaking,’ said Ellen; ‘but, thank heaven, her sufferings have come to an end now, and I trust God will forgive your share in them, Stephen.’

And then, sitting by his bedside through the long hours of that night, she tried in very simple words to awaken him to a sense of his condition. It was not an easy business to let any glimmer of spiritual light in upon the darkness of that sordid mind. There did arise perhaps in this last extremity some dim sense of remorse in the breast of Mr. Whitelaw, some vague consciousness that in that one act of his life, and in the whole tenor of his life, he had not exactly shaped

his conduct according to that model which the parson had held up for his imitation in certain rather prosy sermons, indifferently heard, on the rare occasions of his attendance at the parish church. But whatever terrors the world to come might hold for him seemed very faint and shapeless, compared with the things from which he was to be taken. He thought of his untimely death as a hardship, an injustice almost. When his wife entreated him to see the vicar of Crosber before he died, he refused at first, asking what good the vicar's talk could do him.

‘If he could keep me alive as long as till next July, to see how those turnips answer with the new dressing, I'd see him fast enough,’ he said peevishly; ‘but he can't; and I don't want to hear his preaching.’

‘But it would be a comfort to you, surely, Stephen, to have him talk to you a little about the goodness and mercy of God: He won't tell you hard things, I'm sure of that.’

‘No, I suppose he'll try and make-believe that death's uncommon pleasant,’ answered Mr. White-law with a bitter laugh; ‘as if it could be pleasant to any man to leave such a place as Wyncomb,

after doing as much for the land, and spending as much labour and money upon it, as I have done. It's like nurses telling children that a dose of physic's pleasant ; they wouldn't like to have to take it themselves.'

And then by and by, when his last day had dawned and he felt himself growing weaker, Mr. Whitelaw expressed himself willing to comply with his wife's request.

' If it's any satisfaction to you, Nell, I'll see the parson,' he said. ' His talk can't do me much harm, anyhow.' Whereupon the rector of Crosber and Hallibury was sent for, and came swiftly to perform his duty to the dying man. He was closeted with Mr. Whitelaw for some time, and did his best to awaken Christian feelings in the farmer's breast ; but it was doubtful if his pious efforts resulted in much. The soul of Stephen Whitelaw was in his barns and granaries, with his pigs and cattle. He could not so much as conceive the idea of a world in which there should be no such thing as sale and profit.

His end came quietly enough at last, and Ellen was free. Her time of bondage had been very brief, yet she felt herself twenty years older

than she had seemed before that interval of misery began.

When the will was read by Mr. Pivott on the day of Stephen Whitelaw's funeral, it was found that the farmer had left his wife two hundred a year, derivable from divers investments in railway shares and other kinds of stock, all of a very safe kind. To Mrs. Rebecca Tadman, his cousin, he bequeathed an annuity of forty pounds, the principal to revert to Ellen upon her death. These two bequests, with the testamentary expenses, would absorb the whole of his personal property. His real estate was to be sold, and the entire proceeds devoted to the erection of an additional wing for the extension of Malsham Infirmary, and his gift was to be recorded on a stone tablet in a conspicuous position on the front of that building. This, which was an absolute condition attached to the bequest, had been set forth with great minuteness by the lawyer, at the special desire of his client.

Mr. Carley's expression of opinion after hearing this will read need not be recorded here. It was forcible, to say the least of it; and Mr. Pivott, the Malsham solicitor, protested against such lan-

guage as an outrage upon the finer feelings of our nature.

‘Some degree of disappointment is perhaps excusable upon your part, my dear sir,’ said the lawyer, who wished to keep the widow for his client, and had therefore no desire to offend her father; ‘but I am sure that in your calmer moments you will admit that the work to which your son-in-law has devoted the bulk of his fortune is a noble one. For ages to come the sick and the suffering among our townsfolk will bless the name of Whitelaw. There is a touching reflection for you, Mr. Carley! And really now, your amiable daughter, with an income of two hundred per annum—to say nothing of that odd thousand pounds which must fall-in to her by and by on Mrs. Tadman’s decease—is left in a very fair position. I should not have consented to draw up that will, sir, if I had considered it an unjust one.’

‘Then there’s a wide difference between your notion of justice and mine,’ growled the bailiff; who thereupon relapsed into grim silence, feeling that complaint was useless. He could no more alter the conditions of Mr. Whitelaw’s will than

he could bring Mr. Whitelaw back to life—and that last operation was one which he was by no means eager to perform.

Ellen herself felt no disappointment; she fancied, indeed, that her husband, whom she had never deceived by any pretence of affection, had behaved with sufficient generosity towards her. Two hundred a year seemed a large income to her. It would give her perfect independence, and the power to help others, if need were.

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSING SCENES.

IT was not until the day of her husband's funeral that Ellen Whitelaw wrote to Mr. Fenton to tell him what had happened. She knew that her letter was likely to bring him post-haste to the Grange, and she wished his coming to be deferred until that last dismal day was over. Nor was she sorry that there should be some little pause—a brief interval of ignorance and tranquillity—in Marian's life before she heard of her husband's useless voyage across the Atlantic. She was in sad need of rest of mind and body, and even in those few days gained considerable strength, by the aid of Mrs. Whitelaw's tender nursing. She had not left her room during the time that death was in the darkened house, and it was only on the morning after the funeral that she came downstairs for the first time. Her appearance

had improved wonderfully in that interval of little more than a week. Her eyes had lost their dim weary look, the deathly pallor of her complexion had given place to a faint bloom. But, grateful as she was for her own deliverance, she was full of anxiety about her husband. Ellen Whitelaw's vague assurances that all would be well, that he would soon be restored to her, were not enough to set her mind at ease.

Ellen had not the courage to tell her the truth. It was better that Gilbert Fenton should do that, she thought. He who knew all the circumstances of Mr. Holbrook's journey, and the probabilities as to his return, would be so much better able to comfort and reassure his wife.

'He will come to-day, I have no doubt,' Ellen said to herself on the morning after her husband's funeral.

She told Marian how she had written to Mr. Fenton on the day before, in order to avoid the agitation of a surprise, should he appear at the Grange without waiting to announce his coming. Nor was she mistaken as to the probability of his speedy arrival. It was not long after noon when there came a loud peal of the bell that rang

so rarely. Ellen ran herself to the gate to admit the visitor. She had told him of her husband's death in her last letter, and her widow's weeds were no surprise to him. He was pale, but very calm.

‘She is well?’ he asked eagerly.

‘Yes, sir, she is as well as one could look for her to be, poor dear, after what she has gone through. But she is much changed since last you saw her. You must prepare yourself for that, sir. And she is very anxious about her husband. I don’t know how she’ll take it, when she hears that he has gone to America.’

‘Yes, that is a bad business, Mrs. Whitelaw,’ Gilbert answered gravely. ‘He was not in a fit state to travel, unfortunately. He was only just recovering from a severe illness, and was as weak as a child.’

‘O dear, O dear! But you won’t tell Mrs. Holbrook that, sir?’

‘I won’t tell her more than I can help; of course I don’t want to alarm her; but I am bound to tell her some portion of the truth. You did her husband a great wrong, you see, Mrs. Whitelaw, when you suspected him of some share in

this vile business. He has shown himself really devoted to her. I thank God that it has proved so. And now tell me more about this affair; your letter explains so little.'

'I will tell you all, sir.'

They walked in the garden for about a quarter of an hour before Gilbert went into the house. Eager as he was to see Marian, he was still more anxious to hear full particulars of that foul plot of which she had been made the victim. Ellen Whitelaw told him the story very plainly, making no attempt to conceal her husband's guilty part in the business; and the story being finished, she took him straight to the parlour where he had seen Marian for the first time after her marriage.

It was a warm bright day, and all three windows were open. Marian was sitting by one of them, with some scrap of work lying forgotten in her lap. She started up from her seat as Gilbert went into the room, and hastened forward to meet him.

'How good of you to come!' she cried. 'And you have brought me news of my husband? I am sure of that.'

‘Yes, dear Mrs. Holbrook—Mrs. Saltram ; may I not call you by that name now?—I know all ; and have forgiven all.’

‘Then you know how deeply he sinned against you, and how much he valued your friendship? He would never have played so false a part but for that. He could not bear to think of being estranged from you.’

‘We are not estranged. I have tried to be angry with him ; but there are some old ties that a man cannot break. He has used me very ill, Marian ; but he is still my friend.’

His voice broke a little as he uttered the old familiar name. Yes, she was changed, cruelly changed, by that ordeal of six months’ suffering. The brightness of her beauty had quite faded ; but there was something in the altered face that touched him more deeply than the old magic. She was dearer to him, perhaps, in this hour than she had ever been yet. Dearer to him, and yet divided from him utterly, now that he professed himself her husband’s friend as well as her own.

Friendship, brotherly affection, those chastened sentiments which he had fancied had superseded all warmer feelings—where were they now? By

the passionate beating of his heart, by his eager longing to clasp that faded form to his breast, he knew that he loved her as dearly as on the day when she promised to be his wife; that he must love her with the same measure till the end of his existence.

‘Thank God for that,’ Marian said gently; ‘thank God that you are still friends. But why did he not come with you to-day? You have told him about me, I suppose?’

‘Not yet, Marian; I have not been able to do that. Nor could he come with me to-day. He has left England—on a false scent.’

And then he told her, in a few words, the story of John Saltram’s voyage to New York; making very light of the matter, and speaking cheerily of his early return.

‘He will come back at once, of course, when he finds how he has been deceived,’ Gilbert said.

Marian was cruelly distressed by this disappointment. She tried to bear the blow bravely, and listened with a gentle patience to Gilbert’s reassuring arguments; but it was a hard thing to bear.

‘He will be back soon, you say,’ she said;

‘but soon is such a vague word ; and you have not told me when he went.’

Gilbert told her the date of John Saltram’s departure. She began immediately to question him as to the usual length of the voyage, and to calculate the time he had had for his going and return. Taking the average length of the voyage as ten days, and allowing ten days for delay in New York, a month would give ample time for the two journeys ; and John Saltram had been away more than a month.

Gilbert could see that Marian was quick to take alarm on discovering this.

‘My dear Mrs. Saltram, be reasonable,’ he said gently. ‘Finding such a cheat put upon him, your husband would naturally be anxious to bring your father to some kind of reckoning, to extort from him the real secret of your fate. He would no doubt stay in New York to do this ; and we cannot tell how difficult the business might prove, or how long it would occupy him.’

‘But if he had been detained like that, he would surely have written to you,’ said Marian ; ‘and you have heard nothing from him since he left England.’

‘Unhappily nothing. But he is not the best correspondent in the world, you know.’

‘Yes, yes, I know that. Yet, in such a case as this, he would surely have written, if he were well.’ Her eyes met Gilbert’s as she said this. She stopped abruptly, dismayed by something in his face.

‘You are hiding some misfortune from me,’ she cried; ‘I can see it in your face. You have had bad news of him !’

‘Upon my honour, no. He was not in very strong health when he left England, that is all; and, like yourself, I am naturally anxious.’

He had not meant to admit even as much as this just yet; but having said this, he found himself compelled to say more. Marian questioned him so closely, that she finally extorted from him the whole history of John Saltram’s illness. After that it was quite in vain to attempt consolation. She was very gentle, very patient, troubling him with no vain wailings and lamentations; but he could see that her heart was almost broken.

He left her at the end of a few hours to return to London, promising to go on to Liverpool

next day, in order to be on the spot to await her husband's return, and to send her the earliest possible tidings of it.

‘Your friendship for us has given you nothing but trouble and pain,’ she said; ‘but if you will do this for me, I shall be grateful to you for the rest of my life.’

There was no occasion for that journey to Liverpool. When he arrived in London that night, Gilbert Fenton found a letter waiting for him at his Wigmore-street lodgings—a letter with the New-York postmark, but *not* addressed in his friend’s hand. He tore it open hurriedly, just a little alarmed by this fact.

His first feeling was one of relief. There were three separate sheets of paper in the envelope, and the first which he took up was in John Saltram’s hand—a hurried eager letter, dated some weeks before.

‘My dear Gilbert,’ he wrote, ‘I have been duped. This man Nowell is a most consummate scoundrel. The woman with him is not Marian, but some girl whom he has picked up to represent her—his wife perhaps, or something worse.

I was very ill on the passage out, and only discovered the trick at the last. Since then I have traced the scoundrel to his quarters, and have had an interview with him—rather a stormy one, as you may suppose. But the long and short of it is that he defies me. He tells me that my wife is in England, and safe, but will admit no more. I have consulted a lawyer here, but it seems I can do nothing against him—or nothing that will not involve a more complicated and protracted business than I have time or patience for. I don't want this wretch to go scot-free. It is evident that he has hatched this plot in order to get possession of his daughter's money, and I have little doubt the lawyer Medler is in it. But of course my first duty, as well as my most ardent desire, is to find Marian; and for this purpose I shall come back to England by the first steamer that will convey me, leaving Mr. Nowell's punishment to the chances of the future. My dear girl's property, as well as herself, will be best protected by my presence in England.'

There was a pause here, and the next paragraph was dated two days after.

‘If I have strength to come, I shall return by the next steamer; but the fact is, my dear Gilbert, I am very ill—have been completely prostrate since writing the above—and a doctor here tells me I must not think of the voyage yet awhile. But I sha’n’t allow his opinion to govern me. If I can crawl to the steamer, which starts three days hence, I shall come.’

Then there was another break, and again the writer went on in a weak and more straggling hand, without any date this time.

‘My dear Gil, it’s nearly a week since I wrote the last lines, and I’ve been in bed ever since. I’m afraid there’s no hope for me; in plain words, I believe I’m dying. To you I leave the duty I am not allowed to perform. Marian is living, and in England. I believe that scoundrelly father of hers told me the truth when he declared that. You will not rest till you find her, I know; and you will protect her fortune from that wretch. God bless you, faithful old friend! Heaven knows how I yearn for the sight of your honest face, lying here among strangers, to be buried in a foreign land. See that my wife pays Mrs. Branstion the money I borrowed to come here; and

tell her that I was grateful to her, and thought of her on my dying bed. To my wife I send no message. She knows that I loved her ; but how dear she has been to me in this bitter time of separation, she can never know.

‘ You will find a bulky ms. at my chambers, in the bottom drawer on the right-side of my desk. It is my Life of Swift—unfinished as my own life. If, after reading it, you should think it worth publishing, as a fragment, with my name to it, I should wish you to arrange its publication. I should be glad to leave my name upon something.’

In a stranger’s hand, and upon another sheet of paper, Gilbert read the end of his friend’s history.

‘ SIR,—I regret to inform you that your friend Mr. Saltram expired at eleven o’clock last night (Wednesday, May 2d), after an illness of a fortnight’s duration, throughout which I gave him my best attention as his medical adviser. He will be buried in the Cypress-hill cemetery, on Long Island, at his own request ; and he has left suffi-

cient funds for the necessary expenses, and the payment of his hotel bill, as well as my own small claim against him. Any surplus which may be left I shall forward to you, when these payments have been made. I enclose a detailed account of the case for your satisfaction, and have the honour to be, sir,

‘Yours very obediently,

‘SILAS WARREN, M.D.

‘113 Sixteenth-street, New York,
‘May 3, 186—.’

This was all.

And Gilbert had to carry these tidings to Marian. For a time he was almost paralysed by the blow. He had loved this man as a brother; if he had ever doubted the strength of his attachment to John Saltram, he knew it now. But the worst of all was, that one bitter fact—Marian must be told, and by him.

He went back to the Grange next day. Again and again upon that miserable journey he acted over the scene which was to take place when he came to the end of it—in spite of himself, as it were—going over the words he was to say, while Marian’s face rose before him like a picture. How

was he to tell her? Would not the very fact of this desolation coming to her from his lips be sufficient to make him hateful to her in all the days to come? More than once upon that journey he was tempted to turn back, and to leave his dismal news to be told in a letter.

But when the fatal moment did at last arrive, the event in no manner realised the picture of his imagination. Time was not given to him to speak those solemn preliminary words by which he had intended to prepare the victim for her death-blow. His presence there, and his presence alone, were all-sufficient to prepare her for some calamity.

‘ You have come back to me, and without him !’ she exclaimed. ‘ Tell me what has happened ; tell me at once.’

He had no time to defer the stroke. His face told her so much. In a few moments—before his broken words could shape themselves into coherence—she knew all.

There are some things that can never be forgotten. Never, to his dying day, can Gilbert Fenton forget the quiet agony he had to witness then.

She was very ill for a long time after that day

—in danger of death. All that she had suffered during her confinement at Wyncomb seemed to fall upon her now with a double weight. Only the supreme devotion of those who cared for her could have carried her through that weary time; but the day did at last come when the peril was pronounced a thing of the past, and the feeble submissive patient might be carried away from the Grange—from the scene of her brief married life and of her bitter widowhood.

She went with Ellen Whitelaw to Ventnor. It was late in August before she was able to bear this journey; and in this mild refuge for invalids she remained throughout the winter.

Even during that trying time, when it seemed more than doubtful whether she could live to profit by her grandfather's bequest, her interests had been carefully watched by Gilbert Fenton. It was tolerably evident to his mind that Mr. Medler had been a tacit accomplice in Percival Nowell's fraud; or, at any rate, that he had enabled the pretended Mrs. Holbrook to obtain a large sum of ready-money with greater ease than she could have done had he, as executor, been scrupulously careful to obtain her identification

from some more trustworthy person than he knew Percival Nowell to be.

Whether these suspicions of Gilbert's were correct, whether the lawyer had been actually deceived, or had willingly lent himself to the furtherance of Nowell's design, must remain unascertained; as well as the amount of profit which Mr. Medler may have secured to himself by the transaction. The law held him liable for the whole of the moneys thus paid over in fraud or error; but the law could do very little against a man whose sole earthly possessions appeared to be comprised by the worm-eaten desks and shabby chairs and tables in his dingy offices. The poor consolation remained of making an attempt to get him struck off 'the Rolls'; but when the City firm of solicitors in whose hands Gilbert had placed Mrs. Saltram's affairs suggested this, Marian herself entreated that the man might have the benefit of the doubt as to his complicity with her father, and that no effort should be made to bring legal ruin upon him.

'There has been enough misery caused by this money already,' she said. 'Let the matter rest. I am richer than I care to be, as it is.'

Of course Mr. Medler was not allowed to retain his position as executor. The Court of Chancery was appealed to in the usual manner, and intervened for the future protection of Mrs. Saltram's interests.

About Nowell's conduct there was, of course, no doubt; but after wasting a good deal of money and trouble in his pursuit, Gilbert was fain to abandon all hope of catching him in the wide regions of the new world. It was ascertained that the woman who had accompanied him in the Oronoco as his daughter was actually his wife—a girl whom he had met at some low London dancing-rooms, and married within a fortnight of his introduction to her. It is possible that prudence as well as attachment may have had something to do with this alliance. Mr. Nowell knew that, once united to him in the bonds of holy matrimony, the accomplice of his fraud would have no power to give evidence against him. The amount which he had contrived to secure to himself by this plot amounted in all to something under four thousand pounds; and out of this it may fairly be supposed that Mr. Medler claimed a considerable percentage. The only information that Gil-

bert Fenton could ever obtain from America was, of a shabby swindler arrested in a gambling-house in one of the more remote western cities, whose description corresponded pretty closely with that of Marian's father.

There comes a time for the healing of all griefs. The cruel wound closes at last, though the scar, and the bitter memory of the stroke, may remain for ever. There came a time—some years after John Saltram's death—when Gilbert Fenton had his reward. And if the woman he won for his wife in these latter days was not quite the fresh young beauty he had wooed under the walnut-trees in Captain Sedgewick's garden, she was still infinitely more beautiful than all other women in his eyes ; she was still the dearest and best and brightest and purest of all earthly creatures for him. In that happy time—that perfect summer and harvest of his life—all his fondest dreams have been realised. He has the home he so often pictured, the children whose airy voices sounded in his dreams, the dear face always near him, and, sweeter than all, the knowledge that he is loved almost as he loves. The bitter appren-

ticeship has been served, and the full reward has been granted.

For Ellen Whitelaw too has come the period of compensation, and the farmer's worst fears have been realised as to Frank Randall's participation in that money he loved so well. The income grudgingly left to his wife by Stephen has enabled Mr. Randall to begin business as a solicitor upon his own account, in a small town near London, with every apparent prospect of success. Ellen's home is within easy reach of the riverside villa occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Fenton; so she is able to see her dear Marian as often as she likes; nor is there any guest at the villa more welcome than this faithful friend.

The half-written memoir of Jonathan Swift was published; and reviewers, who had no compunction in praising the dead, were quick to recognise the touch of a master-hand, the trenchant style of a powerful thinker. For the public the book is of no great value; it is merely a curiosity of literature; but it is the only monument of his own rugged genius which bears the name of John Saltram.

Poor little Mrs. Branston has not sacrificed all the joys of life to the manes of her faithless lover. She is now the happy wife of a dashing naval officer, and gives pleasant parties which bring life and light into the great house in Cavendish-square ; parties to which Theobald Pallinson comes, and where he shines as a small feeble star when greater lights are absent—singing his last little song, or reciting his last little poem, for the delight of some small coterie of single ladies not in the first bloom of youth ; but parties from which Mrs. Pallinson keeps aloof in a stern spirit of condemnation, informing her chosen familiars that she was never more cruelly deceived than in that misguided ungrateful young woman, Adela Branston.

THE END.

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92



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